Islamic Movements and the West: Evolving Attitudes and Relationships

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Introduction

The relationship between Islamic movements and the governments and societies of the Western world has been an issue that has come increasingly to the forefront of international affairs. It has been widely suggested from all sides that the hostility that now characterises this relationship is so profound and deep-rooted as to make open and continued conflict not only inevitable but also unresolvable. Another common place observation is that the conflict will expand until it pits the whole of the Muslim World – or even the entire developing world – against the states of the West. However, such views fail to take account of two factors: firstly, the complex structure and nature of the relationship between Islamic movements and the West; and secondly, the dynamic qualities of that relationship that allows for changes and developments – some of which are already occurring.

Background

The West as a general region - referring more specifically to Western Europe and North America - has played a crucial role in the growth, ideologies and strategies of Islamic movements and governments throughout the Middle East region. The first manifestations of what has come to be termed 'Islamism' arguably emerged during the early years of the present century and, by its own admission, developed in reaction to Western incursions into the Muslim heartland. The *salafiyyah* movement - which is seen as the spiritual forefather of many modern Islamic movements - explicitly committed itself to resisting Western influences by rediscovering religious purity while at the same time trying to take advantage and make use of the technological advances achieved in the West. The creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the ١٩٢٠s was founded for this same purpose and in reaction to the British presence in Egypt.

As Islamism has developed through the twentieth century, basic resistance to the cultural and physical incursions made by the West has developed into more overt hostility and active opposition. The West in general, and the USA in

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particular, came to symbolise the primary enemy of the Islamist project. Such an attitude reached its zenith in the ١٩٧٠s and ١٩٨٠s when particularly American support for both Israel and more importantly the Shah's regime in Iran led to the US being branded the 'Great Satan' - the principle enemy of Islam and Muslims.

US and Western support for Israel and the Shah were not the only factors that attracted the enmity of Islamic activists and movements. Employing often the terminology of neo-Marxism, Islamists accused the West of attempting a reconquest of the Muslim World through forms of cultural imperialism. Through the arrival of Western styles of dress, entertainment and social behaviour, it was argued, the traditional values of Muslim societies were being systematically and consciously undermined. Such a view was best summed up in the concept of 'Westoxification', which became a powerful *leitmotiv* in Iran in the years leading up to the Revolution.

Hostility characterised relations between Western states and Islamic movements throughout most of the ١٩٨٠s. The antipathy that Islamic movements and the new Islamic Republic in Iran regarded the West with became mutual as Western states and their representatives suffered attacks from Islamic movements and governments. Beginning with the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and continuing with the series of attacks against French and American troops in Lebanon, attitudes in the West began to harden towards Islamic movements and governments. The fading of Cold War tensions, led many in government, the media and even academia in the West to see a new East-West conflict emerging - this time between the Western states and the Muslim World. The extent to which these new attitudes had begun to take root was demonstrated during the Gulf Crisis and War of ١٩٩٠–١٩٩١. The media in many Western states portrayed Saddam Hussein as being an Islamist despite the secularist credentials of the Iraqi leader and the hostility he had shown to both neighbouring Iran and Iraq's own Islamic movement.

Towards Détente: The Emergence of the Triangular Relationship

The ١٩٩٠s, however, saw something of a shift in this set of attitudes. While the Western states hardened in their attitudes towards Islamism and Islamic movements, changes occurred in the perspectives found amongst Islamic movements and governments. Although many parts of the very varied Islamist trend remained as hostile as ever to the West and all its works, other parts became more discriminating and nuanced in their approach to the West.

The ١٩٩٠s witnessed a slow, but perceptible, shift in the attitude of Iran to the Western world. Long regarded, even by many Sunni Muslim groups, as the symbolic standard bearer of the Islamic resistance struggle against the West, the Islamic Republic in the wake of the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in ١٩٨٩ began a slow process of rapprochement with the West. Co-operatively neutral during the Gulf War, helpful on the issue of Western hostages held in Lebanon and, finally, removing the state-sponsored threat to the British author Salman Rushdie, Iran tried to mend fences with the states of the West. In doing this, Iran's leaders met with continued animosity from Western governments which appeared reluctant to believe that Iran's overtures could be judged genuine. Nevertheless, the election in ١٩٩٧ to the Iranian presidency of Mohammed Khatami, who strongly supported the process of rapprochement, attracted significant attention in the West and prompted widespread speculation that a new less confrontational relationship with Iran could be forged.

There was also a metamorphosis in the attitudes of a number of Islamist movements in other countries - particularly in those states where they constituted the main opposition to the existing government. Conflict between these movements and the governments in the countries in which they operated led many Islamist movements to switch the main focus of their ideological hostility away from the West in general, and the US in particular, towards the local governments which many of them were seeking to overthrow or replace. Even though many of the governments in the Middle East were portrayed as puppets of Western powers, the iniquities of the local rulers came to be viewed as of more much immediate concern and blame than the broader influences of states such as Britain, France and the USA. Moreover, as the conflict between Islamist movements and local governments intensified in such places as Tunisia, Egypt and particularly Algeria during the ١٩٩٠s, the West came to be seen by Islamists as no longer an active opponent in the struggle, but as a more neutral force and perhaps, even a possible strategic and tactical ally.

The process was aided by two further factors. Firstly, the growth in concern in Western countries (particularly at the non-governmental level) with issues such as democratisation and particularly human rights, put pressure on many Middle Eastern states. As the principle victims of both human rights abuses and attempts to forestall democratisation, Islamist movements were able to pressurise various governments in the region through publicising these issues. Secondly, the intensification of attempts in many Middle Eastern states to clampdown on Islamist opposition groups forced many of the leaders and activists of these movements into exile. The chosen place of exile for most of these figures

has been the West. Germany, Belgium, Italy and even the USA have become home to many exiled Islamist figures.

However, the place that has come to attract most such figures is undoubtedly Britain. London has been dubbed, largely correctly, the capital of the Islamist movement world-wide. Britain has become the organisational hub for Islamist movements from across the Middle East region. Senior figures from Islamist movements from Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Libya all live in exile in Britain. The tolerance of their presence that has been shown to such groups, particularly in Britain, has resulted in the development of a much more positive attitude on the part of many Islamist movements towards the West. Although whether this attitude and often publicly expressed gratitude is really genuine or designed to flatter their host countries is the subject of much debate and will be discussed later.

There has therefore evolved what could be described as a more 'triangular' set of relationships - with the West, local Middle Eastern Governments and Islamist movements each positioned at an apex. In this configuration, Islamist hostility is no longer primarily directed at the West but more usually at their own local governments. Western governments, although often seen to be the main backers of such governments, are also perceived to be potentially useful strategic allies or 'honest brokers' who have the ability to put pressure on local governments.

Another related development that has occurred during the ١٩٩٠s has been an increasing trend amongst both Islamist governments and movements to differentiate between different countries in the West. The West has come to be seen less and less as a homogenous bloc and more a collection of individual states with varying interests and attitudes, which can be dealt with and approached in varying ways.

The chief factor behind this development has been the shift of the focus of developments concerning Islamist movements westwards, away from the Gulf region, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula and towards the Maghreb. The rise to prominence of Islamist movements in the Maghreb, particularly in Algeria, in

the ١٩٩٠s, has highlighted the concerns of this particular part of the Arab and

Muslim World and the concerns of the locally based Islamist groups.

For Islamist movements in the Maghreb, America had never been the principle external enemy. The one-time "Great Satan" of the Eastern Middle East attracted relatively little attention in the rhetoric and ideology of the Maghrebi movements. Instead, it was France that was perceived to be the major foe. France's pervasive influence during the colonial period, most clearly visible in Algeria, was seen by Islamist groups in the Maghreb as their major concern. French attempts to alter the political, cultural, religious and above all linguistic

complexion of the Maghreb led many Islamists to view France with great hostility. It was believed that France's insidious influences remained present in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco long after these states achieved their independence and were the chief cause of the various political, economic and social difficulties experienced by these countries. This hostility towards France has led many Maghrebi Islamists to adopt a far more positive attitude towards other Western states, particularly Britain and the US which they see as being far less hostile and far less of a threat.

Western Trends Towards Political Islam

Western attitudes towards political Islam and Islamic movements and governments having hardened in the ١٩٨٠s have, as indicated, been much slower to change, if at all. In analysing 'Western' attitudes one is of course not talking about something entirely homogenous. Different nuances exist both within and between various states.

Within States
Popular and Media Reactions

Within states we can perhaps identify attitudes at the popular level, the more educated level and at the policy-making level.

It seems clear that at the popular level, a significant level of Islamophobia appears to be present. Countries such as Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan under the Taliban have frequently been both demonised and ridiculed. More worryingly, at the popular level in Western states, this ridicule and demonisation appears to have been extended to both Islam and Muslims generally.

The popular media appears to both reflect and feed these perceptions. Stories concerning restrictions on the perceived rights of women, the practice of so-called 'Islamic' punishments in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia receive regular coverage. The puritanical policies of the Taliban in Afghanistan towards things like modern communications and entertainment have attracted widespread if fairly shallow coverage. Significantly, this predominantly critical coverage often extends to those sections of the media that cater to the better educated. In Britain, in particular, this can largely be attributed to the reaction of Britain's liberal middle-classes towards the Salman Rushdie Affair - there being substantial sympathy for the author and his position. It was noteworthy that even when Prince Charles spoke a few years ago in favourable terms about Islam, his sentiments were greeted with hostility in many newspapers. Columnists suggested

that by praising Islam, the heir to the British throne was endorsing both discrimination against women and the *fatwa* on Rushdie.

Nevertheless, it should be said that in certain sections of the media the treatment of Islamism and Islamist movements is less hostile. A number of newspapers in Western states have given a sympathetic hearing to Islamist critics of a number of Middle Eastern regimes, particularly on the issue of human rights. In Britain, for example, *The Observer* newspaper has regularly reported in detail on the human rights abuses allegedly carried out by regimes such as Egypt and particularly Algeria against members and suspected members of Islamic movements in their countries.

Policy-Making

For Western policy-makers the perceptions of political Islam has been mixed and is arguably still in the process of evolution. Policy-makers at all levels are subject to a variety of pressures from different sources.

Some policy-makers at high levels, particularly in the United States, are prone to be influenced by the quasi-academic 'policy-making' sector, which attempts to look at the 'broader picture.' Certain theories on relations with the Islamic world have swung in and out of vogue, most notably those typified by Samuel Huntingdon's "Clash of Civilizations" which suggested that 'The West' and 'The Islamic World' were two separate, homogenous and distinct civilisations destined to come into conflict.

Another factor influencing attitudes towards Islamic movements amongst policy-makers is the fact that a number of the senior personnel in many of the foreign ministries in the Western states working in fields related to the Middle East are traditional Arabists whose attitudes are often heavily influenced by the ideals of Arab nationalism. The tensions and rivalries that have often existed between the ideologies of Arab nationalism and Islamism have led many of these Arabists figures to view Islamism as an aberration and thus feel a certain hostility towards it.

There is also the consideration that there are often differing views between ambassadorial staff and those officials based back in the home country. Embassies and ambassadors in many Middle Eastern states have inevitably had more exposure to the host governments' attitudes concerning Islamism. This can lead to contrasting sympathies and views of events, especially if domestically based staff have been more exposed to the views of the Islamist movements in exile in the home countries. However, the same is undoubtedly also true of attitudes towards Islamist governments, with locally based staff more prone to defending the regime's point of view.

Ultimately, though, official attitudes at high levels in the Western governments are dictated by other concerns. Regional stability and the

maintenance of defensive and trade relations have tended to dictate policy in these areas. Senior Western policy-makers are generally uncomfortable with the whole issue of Islamism. Personally, many feel no sympathy towards it, but at the same time there is an awareness of the issues of human rights and democracy that Islamist movements raise. In general, most policy-makers try to ignore the issue whenever possible.

Between States

Differences in attitudes towards political Islam also exist between states in the Western world. Three states - Britain, France and the United States - have traditionally dominated relations between the West and the Middle East, although states such as Germany, Italy and Spain have become increasingly important in recent years.

The most noticeable differences in approach towards the issue of political Islam have emerged between Britain and France. The main issue of contention between them has been Britain's tolerance of North African, particularly, Algerian, Islamists on its soil. France has on occasion accused Britain of providing what it perceives as a 'safe haven' for terrorists. France's concern with this issue can be chiefly explained by reference to France's continuingly close links to North Africa. France has been more prone to being sympathetic and supportive to the current regime in Algeria and is therefore more hostile to Algeria's Islamists. Having suffered terrorist attacks connected with the conflict in Algeria over recent years France also feels more vulnerable and thus more sensitive to developments in the region. Also, to some extent, it feels that because of both its historic and current links with the Maghreb, it should take the lead especially amongst the Western states in policy towards this region.

The USA has continued to play an ambiguous and often fairly neutral role especially with regard to Algeria. It has frequently seemed reluctant to condemn to severely either the Islamists or the regime in Algeria.

The United States and, to a greater extent, Britain's ambivalence towards political Islam could also be explained in strategic terms, particularly with regard to the tolerance shown to Islamists living in exile in both countries. Western states are undoubtedly aware of the potential benefits of remaining in touch and on good terms with Islamist movements. Not only does a policy of tolerance allow observation of these movements and their activities, but it also provides a window onto developments within these movements at the organisational and, more importantly, the ideological level. Policy-makers are perhaps considering the possibility that one day one or perhaps several of these movements might come to form all or part of governmental administrations in their countries of origin. The gratitude that these potential future governments might then feel towards former host states would clearly be beneficial. There is an awareness, born perhaps from

the United States experience with Iran, that alienation from opposition movements and too close ties with existing regimes may create serious later difficulties.

A less cynical view might suggest that there are hopes that the presence of Islamist organisations within Western states might play some role in curbing particularly the ideological extremes of some of these groups. London, in particular, has become a lively forum for debate on issues relating to Islamism and the Islamist movements. Islamists and their critics regularly spar at conferences, meetings and talks arranged by a variety of private, academic and official organisations. Even more significantly, Western states have become major forums for debates within Islamist movements themselves, groupings and individuals examining and developing their views on a growing range of issues - frequently exposing ideological and strategic rifts. It is hoped that this atmosphere of openness and debate not only challenges Islamists to examine and think through their ideas more fully, but also leads to an appreciation of the importance of open debate, pluralism and the practice of democracy. Such an effect has been almost explicitly acknowledged by a number of Islamist leaders themselves, such as Rachid Ghannoushi from Tunisia who claims that his ideal model of Islamic governance would more closely resemble the British political system than the political system operated in Iran.

There is an ongoing debate about whether the supposed moderation of certain Islamist groups based in Western states is really only a confidence trick designed to keep their hosts happy. Nevertheless, a growing number of specialist academics in Western countries have begun to believe that some of the ideological shifts within a number of important Islamic organisations are significant and do represent a trend towards a more democratically based approach to politics and society.

Conclusions

The future course of relations between Islamist movements and governments on the one hand, and Western states and societies on the other is difficult to predict. Although, as has been discussed, new and more positive aspects of the relationship are emerging, it cannot be denied that suspicion and latent hostility remain the fundamental characteristics of attitudes, particularly at the popular level. Ignorance, and the fear that comes from it, substantially explains this popular antipathy which is felt on both sides. However, it could also be argued that differences in both political and economic development also play their part. These differences prompt crude speculation from one side that religion is a factor in explaining underdevelopment, and from the other that advanced development has come and is sustained by the exploitation and repression of other societies. It can only be hoped that greater contact and awareness of the views and

circumstances of both 'sides' can reduce tensions – at least to a point where they can be exercised at the level of intellectual debate, rather than physical conflict.