*Sophie Masson*

# An Interview with Daniel Pipes

Dr Daniel Pipes, director and founder of the Middle Eastern Forum, an American think-tank, is one of the world's foremost experts on the Middle East and Islam, most specifically on Islamism, and Islamist terrorism. The son of the renowned historian and Sovietologist Professor Richard Pipes, who served as President Reagan's top adviser on the Soviet Union, Daniel Pipes was appointed last year by President Bush to the board of directors of the US Institute of Peace, which is dedicated to "the prevention, management and peaceful resolution of international conflicts".

One of the few analysts to understand early the threat of militant Islam, warning in 1995 that "unnoticed by most Westerners, war has been unilaterally declared on Europe and the United States", Dr Pipes serves on the Special Task Force on Terrorism and Technology at the US Department of Defense. He is the author of twelve books, and a columnist for the *New York Sun* and the *Jerusalem Post*. His work has frequently appeared in the Australian press, and he has been a guest on many television and radio programs in Australia, the USA, and many other places, as well as speaking in many different forums all over the world.

I had the good fortune to catch up with Dr Pipes on his recent Australian visit, where he came as a guest of the Centre for Independent Studies.

The threat of Islamist terrorism, revealed with shocking suddenness to the majority of Westerners on September 11, 2001, might seem to be at the forefront of much of the resulting policy of the West, but for Daniel Pipes, an even thornier problem looms ahead:

> The greater challenge to us in the West is the non-violent Islamist program. We have intelligence agencies to confront terrorism, but we're not prepared for the threat coming from radical mosques and Islamist ideologues who want to transform our societies. We've not encountered this before, and all sectors, whether in politics, education, or the media, are unsure what to do. How do you contend with people whose avowed aim is, in American terms, legally to replace the Constitution with the Koran?
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> It might be much more difficult to fight them, who are trying to eat away at us from the inside of a democratic, pluralistic, law-abiding society, than it is to fight the terrorists. Indeed, it could be said the terrorists have detracted from the non-violent Islamists' position: they awoke the West to the reality that we confront a dangerous enemy, and their tactics alienate people everywhere.
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> It's easy to argue for the suppression of bombers; not so easy to argue for the halting of those who eat away like termites at our society, exploiting our openness and tolerance. And what measures does one take against them? This means the overseeing of schools, mosques, immigration and so on. Many policy-makers agonise over this situation; it's very worrisome, because it is so difficult to steer the right course on these very delicate matters.

One major problem, he said, was that many people in the West have lost a sense of purpose and an understanding of what their culture represents:

> There are some countries in the West, particularly, I would say, the United Kingdom, sometimes known as Londonistan, where anything seems to go. In contrast, the French tackle the problem of non-violent Islamists with energy. Recently, they have shown signs of trying to deal with this—for example, there was an imam near Lyons, Abdelkader Bouziane, who was expelled from the country in April for an interview endorsing husbands' right to beat their wives, though he was re-admitted a short time later. Despite this, the trends are clear. Sometimes, in my more provocatively pessimistic moments, I can see Notre

Dame being turned into a mosque, or even blown up as a vestige of the *jahiliya* (age of ignorance).

In other countries too, there are problems—in Australia, for instance, the gang rapes suggest the sorts of problems that exist and specifically that immigrants from Muslim countries tend not to assimilate but rather retain sexual and political attitudes that ill serve both them and Australia. I note that two high-ranking politicians, one in the government and one in the opposition, have explicitly told me on this trip that the government response to this problem has been intentionally to decrease the number of Muslim immigrants to Australia.

Much of the Left, he argues, misunderstands the threat of Islamism:

The extreme Left and extreme Right have always been on the side of destructive revolution and overthrowing of the state, and therefore it's not unexpected to see them siding with the Islamists against Western society. The extreme Left, for instance, always expected Marxist revolution in the West, and when this didn't come, it was bitterly disappointed. Islamism offers an alternative way to destroy the West, and therefore they often cheer it on.

The dangerous Right has equally also wanted to destroy Western society as it is and so has a soft spot for the Islamists. What's surprised and appalled me is how much of the moderate Left is also going along with this attitude. It finds in Islamists the opponents of their opponents, and so, however different their program, at least they have the right target. You see this in opinion outlets, for instance, where the moderate Left welcomes all kinds of strange theories and notions that in the past it would have considered beyond the pale.

The conspiracy mindset, which is very prevalent in the Middle East (see Dr Pipes' two excellent books on the subject, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* and *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes, and Where It Comes from*), appears to be on the increase in the West, I observed. Does he think this represents a major problem for our societies?

I'm tempted to say they are on the increase in the West, but I think one needs first to answer a couple of questions. One: are these theories truly more around, or does it just seem that way? Two: are they more effective—that is, are people suffering more as a result of them? You've got to discount an awful lot of conspiracy theories which are just playful, really—that is, they have no real consequences; for instances, theories on UFOs or Atlantis or the Kennedy assassinations. The others—well, they are on the increase, and some of them might make a lot of noise but I am not sure they are having more impact.

There's an interesting difference these days between conspiracy theorists in the West and those in the non-Western world. In the West, it takes a certain personality type to be a conspiracy theorist; in the non-Western world, regular citizens are conspiracy theorists. In the Middle East, it is rarer *not* to believe in conspiracy theories than to believe in them. And the theories lack any of the playful aspect of some Western ones.

ISRAEL, a key figure in many Middle Eastern conspiracy theories, is seen as an arch-villain. Many commentators have observed that this is one of the most dangerous times for Israel, especially as a great many European states seem unable to comprehend this. (Witness Paul Marie Coûteaux, a French parliamentarian who thought it would be a great idea to give Arab states nuclear weapons "to persuade Israel that it cannot simply do whatever it wants".) Many commentators have expressed great pessimism about the future of Israel, and I asked Daniel Pipes if he shared this outlook.

Certainly, there is a great danger for Israel in the dehumanisation of Jews now taking place. It offers an uneasy parallel to Nazi Germany of the 1930s, when the systematic dehumanisation of Jews laid the foundations for the death camps of the 1940s. Today's comparable dehumanisation of Jews could be the precursor to the Muslim use of WMDs against Israel. The Europeans are particularly keen to ignore the very real hatreds of the Muslim world towards Israel, and the desire to wipe it off the face of the earth, but even the US government sometimes disregards it. For instance, when former Malaysian president Mahathir Mohamad made inflammatory statements about Jews at an Islamic conference last year, Condoleezza Rice, the US National Security Adviser, commented, "I don't think they are emblematic of the Muslim world"—when in fact, he was applauded and cheered for them by his fellow Muslim leaders. The truth is, they *are* mainstream Muslim views.

Though Dr Pipes supported the war to extirpate Saddam Hussein, he worries about the assumptions made about postwar Iraq. In a *Lateline* interview on ABC television a few months ago, he expressed pessimism for Iraq's future. But when I asked him about this, he said things have been going well of late:

> I've become more optimistic in the recent few weeks. Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi seems to be doing the right thing—he's concentrating on security, and appears to be slowly succeeding. Once the country is secure, I hope the government will open up politically—and it's our obligation on the outside to push it in that direction. This matters not just for Iraq itself but for the whole region, as Iraq will likely have a major impact on how the Middle East evolves. If the experiment there succeeds, it will be a turning-point for the Middle East, and that will have enormous ramifications. If it fails—well, that will have enormous ramifications as well, ones we certainly don't want to see.

Some commentators have laid nearly all the blame for the current upsurge in Islamist radicalism and violence on Saudi Arabia, but Daniel Pipes thinks that overstates the case:

> Islamism is much more than just the Saudi variety: Wahhabism is perhaps its strongest engine today but there are other ones too, such as the Muslim Brethren school coming out of Egypt, the Khomeinist out of Iran, and the Deobandi out of India and Pakistan. But the Iran strand is weak, as Iranians are widely fed up with their revolution.

The Islamist surge, he believes, is a symptom of modernisation, however distorted, in Muslim countries:

> Though it claims its roots stem from tradition, it actually emulates fascism and communism in the revolutionary breaking with tradition and the intent to impose radical utopian views on a subject population, then expand these to the whole world. In spirit, ambition and methods, Islamism is quite familiar to us in the West aware of other totalitarian programs. One big difference of course is that there's no Islamist state that has the kind of power Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia had. This is a diffuse modern enemy—not a command hierarchy. Islamism is thus a *Doppelgänger* of globalisation.

*For more information on Dr Daniel Pipes and his work, visit his website, www.danielpipes.org.*