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# ***Orientalism and US Democratization Policy in the Middle East***

**YAKUB HALABI**

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Much of the literature on democratization in developing countries in general and in the Middle East (ME) in particular has focused on the internal attributes of these states.<sup>1</sup> The literature on democracy promotion in the ME<sup>2</sup> has analyzed the compatibility or incompatibility between Islamic norms and tradition, on the one hand, and modern democratic values, on the other. These experts, who are called orientalists, believe that the Islamic conception of the state—which precludes separation between religion and the state—combined with a weak middle class is the major obstacle to the development of democratic political reforms.<sup>3</sup>

Orientalists, moreover, depict Muslims as anti-Western, anti-modern, and anti-secular. The rise of political Islam in the last two decades in countries like Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Algeria has questioned the ability of the West to continue influencing political trends in the ME and oil market simultaneously with the promotion of liberal democratic norms. Westerners do not make a distinction between the Algerian democratic Islam and the Iranian revolutionary Islam. One American

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<sup>1</sup> For literature that deals with political development in Third World countries, see Gabriel Almond and James Coleman, eds, *The Politics of Developing Areas* (Princeton, NJ, 1960); Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1963); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transition from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore, 1986); Samuel Huntington, "How Countries Democratize", *Political Science Quarterly* (New York), vol. 106, no. 4, 1991, pp. 579–616; Paul Cammack, *Capitalism and Democracy in the Third World: the Doctrine of Political Development* (London, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Although the article refers to the Islamic culture in general, it focuses on the Muslim Middle Eastern countries only. The Middle East in my definition includes also the Arab states of northern Africa. In the Middle East of our era two countries are regarded as democratic states: Israel and Turkey. The latter is still not regarded as fully democratic because of human rights abuse, suppression of the Kurdish minority, and the role of the military in keeping the state secular.

<sup>3</sup> For literature on orientalism, see Bernard Lewis, *The Middle and the West* (New York, 1964); Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conception of the Orient* (New York, 1985); Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London, 1994); John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York, 1992).

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politician, Patrick Buchanan, claims that "the struggle for mankind's destiny was between Christianity and Islam; in the twenty-first century, it may be again."<sup>4</sup> Former President Ronald Reagan links Libyan terrorism with a worldwide Muslim fundamentalist monolithic movement.<sup>5</sup> Former Vice President Dan Quayle links Islamic fundamentalism with Nazism and communism.<sup>6</sup> Further, the collapse of the Soviet Union marks, for some, the onset of a new era of clash of civilizations in which Islam will emerge as the bitter enemy of the West and will fill the vacuum that the decline of communism has created.<sup>7</sup> Finally, many orientalist and neo-orientalists contend that democracy and even capitalism are alien to Islamic culture.<sup>8</sup>

Before going further, it is worth mentioning that the West cannot ignore political trends in the ME because of three reasons: first, the West depends on oil from the Middle East which contains 60 per cent of world oil reserves; second, the US is deeply committed to the security of Israel; and, third, the geographical proximity of the ME to Europe makes the latter vulnerable to the influx of legal and illegal immigrants.<sup>9</sup> The first objective requires, from American perspective, cooperation with a national *elite* in the Gulf that enjoys US protection, high income from the oil revenues, and, in return, plays according to the capitalist rules of the game. In order to realize the second end, the US keeps the ME divided into many small states thereby retaining Israel's superiority in the regional balance of power. Though Israel's military superiority can, and has, deterred any attack by a combination of two or three Arab states, it cannot, however, deter a united Arab assault. Therefore, the US prefers cooperation with weak, authoritarian regimes that are preoccupied with intra-Arab rivalries. Further, the US sees Islamic movements as a monolithic group that is capable of uniting Arabs under the rule of one Caliph and thereby posing a threat to weak authoritarian regimes. The third objective, which is more important to Europe, however, requires the injection of capitalist and democratic notions into the poor countries of the ME in order to raise their living

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Michael Salla, "Political Islam and the West: A New Cold War or the Convergence?", *Third World Quarterly* (Abingdon, Oxford, England), vol. 18, no. 4, 1997, pp. 729–42.

<sup>5</sup> See Esposito, n. 3, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> See Leon Hadar, "The Green Peril", *Foreign Affairs* (New York), vol. 72, no. 2, 1993; Samuel Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1993, pp. 22–49.

<sup>8</sup> As orientalist scholars, I can mention, Bernard Lewis and Elie Kedourie, as neo-orientalists, Daniel Pipes, Martin Indyk and Patricia Crone, among others. For the differences between these two approaches see Yahya Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and Democracy Debate", *Middle East Report* (Washington, DC), July–August 1993, pp. 14–21. In my view, the first condition to call a scholar an orientalist is when she/he is an expert on the oriental culture, language, or history. Huntington belongs to a category of scholars who are specialists in other different areas in social science that relate indirectly to the orient. Huntington developed a general theory about political development and democratization in traditional societies that indirectly relates to Islamic societies.

<sup>9</sup> See Bruno Amoroso, *On Globalization: Capitalism in the 21st Century* (London, 1998), pp. 186–87.

and human rights standards.<sup>10</sup> Thus, cooperation with authoritarian regimes could not be a panacea for the political, social, and economic problems of the ME.

The antagonism between Islam and the West and the contentions of orientalists about the inability of Islamic society to absorb democracy are, however, two sides of the same coin. Since orientalists believe that Islam is a natural enemy of the West and that democracy will bring to power Islamic fundamentalists, then, if the West promotes democracy in Islamic states, it helps its own enemies. One can claim, however, that, since the West believes that Islam and the West are natural enemies, then the West is interested in strengthening its authoritarian allies in the ME in order to protect and safeguard its own interests. The contention regarding the incompatibility between Islam and democracy is no more than an alibi for supporting despotic regimes.

This article contends that Muslim states in the ME, which show pointers to the development of promising democracy, are found outside the American sphere of influence;<sup>11</sup> while democratic experiments in states that are found within that sphere are less promising.<sup>12</sup> It examines the orientalist ideas that channeled US foreign-policy towards cooperation with and fortification of authoritarian regimes. It can be argued that a Middle Eastern state that seeks democracy needs to move to a new independent location outside the American sphere of influence.

This article also focuses on American cultural cognition of Muslims and the way it leads American policy-makers to obstruct the development of democracy in the ME. While we find democratization, passively or actively, in many developing countries in Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, we do not see such a pattern in the ME.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the US is actively supporting traditional authoritarian regimes by providing financial aid (Egypt, Jordan) or military protection (members of the Gulf Cooperation Council or the GCC).

It is not willing to embark upon democratization in the ME that may lead to unpredictable outcome, jeopardize the oil market and world economy. Many studies have found out a direct linear relationship between rise in oil prices on the one hand and inflation and unemployment on the other.<sup>14</sup> A sharp rise in the price of oil is a direct result of political turmoil in the ME, such as the Oil Embargo in late

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174–77.

<sup>11</sup> American sphere of influence in my definition includes states that receive American aid, such as Israel, Egypt and to a certain extent Jordan, states that are militarily protected by the US, such as the Gulf states which are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Turkey as a member of NATO.

<sup>12</sup> Promising democratic signals in my understanding include the following principles: regular elections for the highest post in the country, free press, and regular elections to the parliament.

<sup>13</sup> In Strobe Talbot's view the American political system is founded on the ideal ideas (democracy and freedom) that are applicable to people everywhere.

<sup>14</sup> D. James Hamilton, "This is What Happened to the Oil Price–Macroeconomy Relationship", *Journal of Monetary Economics* (Amsterdam, Netherlands), vol. 38, 1996, pp. 215–20.

1973 or the Iranian revolution in 1979, and negatively affects economic growth in the US. It is not surprising thus that the US pushes hard to promote the peace process between Israel and its neighbours, and blocks Islamic fundamentalism so as to prevent the emergence of any political turbulence that otherwise may undermine the oil market.

A paradox prevails, however, over the process of democratization in the ME. On the one hand, the US is unwilling to promote democracy unless several regional states prove their political and social ability and maturity to absorb this process smoothly, and demonstrate that democracy will not bring to power radical Islamic groups. From the American perspective, the latter will declare *jihad* (holy war) against Israel and will use oil as a weapon against the West, or at least the oil supply will be disrupted due to the rise of fundamentalism and the turmoil that follows it. On the other hand, the process of democratization will not take place because of three reasons. First, democracy will not emerge within the American sphere of influence unless the US starts encouraging or at least ceases impeding it. Second, democracy is an evolutionary and incremental process that does not develop smoothly once it is adopted.<sup>15</sup> People in infant democracies may elect, in the short run, radical groups not only because of the popularity of the latter, but also out of disapproval against a protracted period of humiliation and conspiracy from without,<sup>16</sup> and of corruption and oppression by an authoritarian regime from within. Third, lack of freedom of speech and organization leaves the mosque as the only social institution where political dissenters can gather and organize themselves.

### Democracy Without, Autocracy Within

A glance at the process of democratization in the ME reveals that it developed in countries that lie outside the American sphere of influence, such as, Iran, Yemen, and Algeria. In states that lie within the American sphere of influence we either witness semi-democracy, where a traditional regime remains the supreme power

<sup>15</sup> Democracy was not developed smoothly in the West either. The US experienced a bitter civil war during the 1860s and only several decades after that democracy was introduced there. The UK had also experienced a civil war. France had engaged in a bloody violent revolution that was followed by an oppressive regime. See Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston, 1996). In Germany, democracy brought to power in the early 1930's one of the most radical and racist regimes that history has ever known. Italy was ruled by a fascist regime for more than two decades till it was defeated in the Second World War by the Allies. The US intervention in Italy has installed democracy in a country that was threatened by communism in its first decade after World War II.

<sup>16</sup> Cases of humiliation by the US against the Arab world are: arbitrary support of Israel (vetoes in the UN Security Council in favour of Israel) while the latter oppresses Palestinians and violates the international law in its settlement policy and confiscation of Arab land; US intervention in Lebanon beside the Christian Maronites in early 1980s; and last but not the least is the American lack of sensitivity to the starvation of the Iraqi people since 1991. In general, the US builds good relations with the regimes in the Middle East but not with the people.

(Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt), or the total absence of democratization (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE).

In Egypt, for example, the party of President Hosni Mubarak controls around 80–90 per cent of the parliament's seats. The parliament does not supervise the activity of the executive body, and in the words of two writers, the parliament is a rubber stamp for the executive.<sup>17</sup> The president is elected for a six-year term by the parliament where he is the only candidate. A referendum is held, then, to confirm his nomination. The elections in Egypt do not meet any standard of democracy: "they are not free, not fair and not open".<sup>18</sup> Since the late 1970s, Egypt has received an annual American aid of \$2.1 billion, which includes security and civil aid. Almost half of the Egyptian security budget is covered by the American aid. By 1997, the US aid to Egypt stood at \$49 billion.<sup>19</sup>

Although democratic institutions have been introduced in Jordan and Kuwait, the power of the Parliament remains limited as the King and the Emir, respectively, remain the supreme authority. Bahrain is another American ally, where the US has a naval base. It is a paternal dynastic emirate which has very limited democratic institutions. The actions of the Emir, his brother (who is the prime minister), the Emir's son (who is the crown prince), and the appointed council of ministers, are not open to scrutiny or supervision.<sup>20</sup> Saudi Arabia, the most important ally of the US in the Gulf, has been depicted by one writer as "one of the least democratic states in the world".<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, in the countries that lie outside the American sphere of influence, elections are held for the highest post in the country. Take for example, Iran which had many close ties with the US before the 1979 revolution. In 1953, the US took sides with the Shah against the liberal and nationalist Prime Minister Mossadeq and the elected parliament. Since 1979 Iran has held several quasi-democratic, yet significant, experiments. It held a referendum in March 1979 to uphold the establishment of the Islamic revolution. In July, an Assembly of Experts was elected. In December, another referendum approved the new constitution of

<sup>17</sup> Larry Goodson and Soha Radwan, "Democratization in Egypt in the 1990s: Stagnation, or Merely Stalled", *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Normal, IL), vol. 19, no. 1, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> According to Hudson, during the parliamentary elections in 1990 only 44 per cent of the registered voters voted, and only one-third of the eligible voters were registered. Michael Hudson, "After the Gulf War: Prospects for Democratization in the Arab World", *Middle East Journal* (Washington, DC), vol. 45, no. 3, 1991, p. 413; see also Goodson and Radwan, "Democratization in Egypt in the 1990s", n. 17, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Duncan Clarke, "US Security Assistance to Egypt and Israel: Politically Untouchable?", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2, Spring 1997, p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory F. III Gause and Richard W. Murphy, "Democracy and U.S. Policy in the Muslim Middle East", *Middle East Policy* (Washington, DC), vol. 5, no. 1, 1997; Joe Stork, "Bahrain's Crisis Worsens", *Middle East Report* (Washington, DC), July–September 1997, pp. 33–35; Louay Bahry, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellweather for the Gulf?", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2, May 1997, pp. 42–57.

<sup>21</sup> C. Parodi, E. Rexford and E. Van Wie Davis, "The Silent Demise of Democracy: The Role of the Clinton Administration in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1994, p. 66.



the Islamic Republic.<sup>22</sup> In January 1980, Iran experienced its first presidential elections when Bani-Sadr, who represented the liberals, defeated the candidate of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP). Since 1980, Iran has conducted regular elections every four years for the parliament (*Majlis*) where liberal independent deputies were often elected.<sup>23</sup> In the 1989 and 1993 presidential elections, Hashemi Rafsanjani won an overwhelming majority. Finally, in the May 1997 presidential elections, Muhammad Khatami defeated the candidate of the conservative clergies.

In the Gulf, Yemen is another country which is not within the American sphere of influence. In the 1990s, Yemen has experienced two revolutions: unity and democratization. In fact with unity came more democratization and pluralism as a result of the formation of a new constitution that ensured democracy. The united Yemen has a multiparty system and has held free elections in April 1993 and in May 1997. Both were pronounced to have been free and fair by outside observers.<sup>24</sup> The new constitution has guaranteed freedom of expression, and has allowed the formation of social organization and parties within the limits of law. It is important to note that Yemen is the only state in the Arabian Peninsula that experienced such free elections, even while being the poorest state in the region.

The American reluctance to promote democracy in the ME is illustrated in the words of the American Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, Robert Pelletreau:

Some experts, those who take the most positive attitude toward political Islam, suggest that Islamists should be allowed to participate: if they fail, then they have participated and failed, and if they succeeded, then they have succeeded in a democratic context; that's a little too free and benign [a position] for any US foreignpolicy maker to take. We don't have the luxury of saying any result is all the same to us. First of all, they may stay in power and they may reject democracy once they are in power. Secondly, there may be an immediate effect on neighbouring Islamists or on another issue of immediate importance, such as the peace process. We have to take all other issues into account, which leaves us to take a more restrictive posture than that suggested by some academicians . . . [The] point of departure is basically that an Islamic government is, a priori, anti-West, anti-Israel and anti-democratic, therefore, we should oppose it in every respect.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Articles 107–110 of the Iranian constitution gave the supreme religious leader the authority to vote on all government decisions, and to dismiss the president. The constitution upholds, in addition, the formation of political parties, political associations and to uproot poverty. See Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1989), p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> See Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London, 1995), p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Middle East Report*, July–September 1997, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Middle East Insight* (Washington, DC), vol. 12, nos. 4–5, May–August 1996, p. 4.

It should be noted that Pelletreau does not distinguish between democratic Islam and other non-democratic or revolutionary fundamentalist movements. In his view, both are anti-democratic and will jeopardize American interests in the ME once they win elections.

### **The Orientalist Discourse**

According to Edward Said, orientalism is a discourse that channels Western policy toward the orient in order to dominate and restructure it.<sup>26</sup> A discourse is defined as “a system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense, produces interpretive possibilities by making it virtually impossible to think outside of it. A discourse provides discursive spaces, i.e., concepts, categories, metaphors, models, and analogies by which meanings are created”.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the orientalist discourse has a powerful position to such an extent that Westerners who act, deal, or write about the orient cannot ignore the limits of thought that this discourse imposes upon them.<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, orientalism then forges the way in which the West treats the Orient in order to discipline it and make it adjustable to the needs of the West. It is also associated with “modernizing” the orientalist economy, without really Westernizing its society and political culture, despite, or probably because of, the fact that orientalism contains ideas that reject the Western culture. Growth of a society of the orient on capitalistic lines augments the domination of the West *via* relations of asymmetrical interdependency and simplifies trade interaction between the two cultures.<sup>29</sup> By the same token, domination is made possible through freezing the political culture whereby the West cooperates with one *elite* which it knows very well. This *elite* facilitates Western interests in return for private benefits. It also plays a double role that projects two opposite images in different directions. In the domestic arena, the Gulf states apply traditional laws and customs through which they demonstrate commitment to their traditions and upon which they base their legitimacy. In the international arena, they play according to the rules of the capitalist game whereby they seek to maximize their gains, as rational actors, from the export of oil. This *elite*, moreover, is highly influenced by the Western living style and its

<sup>26</sup> Said, n. 3, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Roxanne L. Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-positivist Analysis of U.S. Counter-insurgency Policy in the Philippines”, *International Studies Quarterly* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 37, 1993, pp. 297–302.

<sup>28</sup> Said, n. 3, pp. 20–21.

<sup>29</sup> Except for the oil issue area, the West enjoys superiority in all other issue areas that connect the Middle East with the West. Moreover, the Gulf oil exporting countries heavily depend on the US for their survival. The US can create issue linkage between smooth supply of oil and security for these regimes. Oil for the US is an economic question, but security for the Gulf regimes is a question of existence. For a theoretical discussion on interdependency, see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Glenview, IL, 1989), second edition.



consumerist culture. The monarchic regimes in the Gulf see the local natural resources as private property of the royal family.

Throughout the nineteenth century and until the Second World War, Great Britain and France had colonized the orient. After that the US became the main hegemon, and now in the post-Cold War it has emerged as the only one. The US approaches the orient with similar tools that Britain and France used in the past. It works with the traditional forces, rather than against them as means to realize its ends. Likewise it perceives various Islamic groups as one monolithic movement. The US opposes these movements not because they support tradition, but because they want to change the political and economic order that Britain and the US have cultivated with the traditional regimes during the twentieth century. Or more precisely, it fears that fundamentalists might establish a political order and survive without the US support. The US protects the political culture (regime) of the Gulf states in return for their cooperation. These regimes cannot solve their security dilemma on their own without American participation in the regional balance of power. The US is less concerned, however, about the people's urge for self-determination. In Iran, for instance, the Shah's regime developed with US support throughout its existence, whereas the succeeding regime under Khomeini did not feel the necessity of seeking security protection from it. A lack of dependence on American military power would automatically diminish US influence in these states and consequently its ability to influence the oil market. The 1990–91 Gulf war proved that without American protection, the Gulf states were unable to meet any security threat from Iran or Iraq.

The US has ignored, however, how the exposure of the countries in the ME to global (Western) culture has affected them. It has also disregarded internal differences within the Arab world and the emergence of new streams that call for reforms. It has assumed that Muslims do not easily take to Westernism and modernism, and that they reject the notions of these two discourses. Thus, in this sense, the talk about world culture that is disseminated *via* globalization (mass media, transportation, finance, goods, and labour) does not apply to Muslims. Further, the US has also helped the traditional *elite* in suppressing every form of popular upsurge on the plea that the support of the ordinary people for the radical movements would jeopardize the political, economic, and social stability of their countries.<sup>30</sup>

One wonders, however, whether it is the oriental culture which blocks reforms, or it is the occident that cannot think outside the orientalist discourse. One also wonders who is more fundamentalist: the pro-American Saudi regime, or the anti-American Iranian regime. For the citizens in the ME, especially for the pluralists, there is little to choose between the American orientalist policy that adheres to the freezing of political reforms and the attitude of the Islamic fundamentalists who want to implement the traditional religious way of life.<sup>31</sup> The latter at least are more willing

<sup>30</sup> See Parsa, n. 22; for a description of American cooperation with dictators elsewhere in Latin America, see Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: US Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Mahamood Amin Al-Alem, *Al-Fekr al-Arabi bayna al-Khosoussiya wal-Kawniyah* [Arab Thought between Particularism and Universalism] (Cairo, 1996), p. 45.

to adopt a policy of equal distribution of wealth. When, for example, the US protects reactionary regimes in the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, etc.) while the fundamentalists call for the establishment of an Islamic order, the citizens are bound to conclude that the two uphold roughly the same social order! The ruling *elite* in the region rigidly enforces the traditional order and way of life, although they themselves adopt a highly Western lifestyle, while the fundamentalists, subject themselves to the rigours of an Islamic lifestyle before imposing the same on the masses. It is, therefore, not surprising that the people in the Gulf don't lend support to the ruling *elite*.

The orient in its classical meaning embraces North Africa, the Middle East and East Asia. Scholars, such as Said, claim that there is a similarity in the orientalist ideas regarding the Far East and the ME.<sup>32</sup> With the emergence of Japan as a major economic power and China as a major political power in the post-Second World War era, however, this similarity ceased to exist. The ME, on the other hand, did not progress either economically or politically. This is why the relevance of the orientalist literature as far as the Far East is concerned diminished with the emergence of certain countries as big powers, and especially when several countries in that region adopted prominent Western notions, such as market economy and democracy.

In this context, it is also worth remembering that America has been actively involved in promoting democracy in some states in the Far East like Japan and South Korea after the Second World War. It has also adopted a progressive approach towards Taiwan, the Philippines, China, and Thailand.<sup>33</sup> It has utilized different international organizations to promote democracy, human rights, and market economy in these countries. But the US has not adopted this approach towards countries of the ME. For it regards both democratic Islam and fundamentalism as two sides of the same coin.

In this context, it may be noted that Realism claims that one country should not be concerned about the type of regime in other countries, but with realizing its interests in the least costly way.<sup>34</sup> It holds that power is the most effective means to realize an end in foreign affairs given the anarchic order of the system.<sup>35</sup> But how a state will use its power depends on a variety of factors. If force is used to promote American oil interest it would destabilize the oil market—the life blood of

<sup>32</sup> Said, n. 3, pp. 49–53.

<sup>33</sup> For analysis of the differences between the exceptionalist, progressive and realist approaches, see Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Intervention", *The New Republic* (Washington, DC), 17 February 1986, pp. 14–21.

<sup>34</sup> John Mearsheimer, "The False Premises of International Institutions", *International Security* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 19, no. 3, 1994–95, pp. 5–49; Joseph M. Greico, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Internationalism", *International Organization* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 42, summer 1998, pp. 585–607.

<sup>35</sup> Many modern realists would argue that military power is the most effective means to promote an end. They downplay the effectiveness of other means such as free trade to realize interests as the least costly way. Realists moreover downplay the significance of international organizations in the process of promoting cooperation. See Mearsheimer, "The False Premises of International Institutions", *ibid.*; Keohane and Nye, n. 29, p. 11.

world economy. Therefore, the US finds it rational to cooperate with traditional regimes that keep the oil market stable; it is more rational because it helps in maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In order to understand American policy in the ME, we need to examine American cultural cognition of Islam.

### Current Orientalism

There are two schools of thought in the US that deal with the issue of Islamic resurgence. One is led by the orientalist and the neo-orientalist (henceforth the essentialists), and the other is the contingencist school.<sup>36</sup> Although the debate between the two is essentially academic in nature, the thinking of only the essentialist school has influenced those formulating American foreign policy.

Basically, within the essentialist school both orientalist and neo-orientalist share the conviction that Islam is incompatible with democracy. Both agree that since there is no separation between religion and state, a secular democratic state cannot emerge in a Muslim country. For orientalist, however, the problem lies in the Islamic religion that promotes political submission and subordination. It regards God as the supreme sovereign and the ruler on earth as his representative. Accordingly, obedience to the ruler is a religious as well as a political duty. This gives the ruler enormous power and authority, putting the ruler and the government in Muslim society in a very advantageous position *vis-à-vis* the civil society. A religion which considers it a religious duty to obey the sovereign coupled with the absence of strong civil society are the main reasons for the lack of democratization.

The notion of a state as a specific territorial entity which is endowed with sovereignty, the notion of popular sovereignty as the foundation of government legitimacy, the idea of representation, of elections of popular suffrage—all of these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition.<sup>37</sup>

He says further :

The duty to obey the ruler, who was the Prophet's apostolic successor, was a religious duty, because the ruler maintained the religion, defended the territory in which it had become established, and enlarged its bounds. . . . In view of the perils to which continuous disorders and the arbitrariness of military usurpers exposed the believers, the divines came to argue that passive obedience to any ruler. . . was a religious duty.<sup>38</sup>

Neo-orientalist, on the other hand, argue that throughout the history of Islam, society has always been strong and regime always weak. Muslim society has

<sup>36</sup> See Salla, "Political Islam and the West", n. 4, pp. 729–31. Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and Democracy Debate", n. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Kedourie, n. 3, pp. 5–6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

engaged in austere, religious, and traditional lifestyle that has seemed to many as right and moral, and it has dissociated itself from the corrupt immoral behaviour of the ruling *elite* that has enjoyed high living standards by misusing national resources. In the words of Sadowski: "By establishing ideals that are impossible to fulfill, Islam ensures that Muslims will view any form of government, sooner or later, as illegitimate. Sincere Muslims tend to withdraw support from their rulers."<sup>39</sup> Thus neo-orientalists perceive Muslim society as composed of two domains that are independent of each other and have minimum interaction. Hence, regimes in Islamic societies remain weak because of lack of legitimacy. For Muslim society, restoring mass legitimacy requires the establishment of an Islamic regime that reflects religious values where moral regime is a Sharia'a regime, the argument continues.

This problem of weak regimes, moreover, assumed increasing significance in the twentieth century when the ruling *elite* in Muslim nations started looking towards modernism (secularism and reformism) as the path to economic, social, and political success. While the *elite* continues to strive to remove all obstacles that stand in the way of modernization, the masses prefer the implementation of the laws of Islamic Sharia'a.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting modernism, thus, obstructs the emergence of modern civil society that can cooperate with, and at the same time monitor, the regime. Further, the structure of Islamic society makes it impervious to modern ideas and institutions. Therefore, the strength of Muslim societies forestalls the emergence of a strong, modern state. Fundamentalism, according to this school, offers the masses a shield against Western influence that the *elite* is eager to import. The lack of common understanding between the *elite* and the masses has caused rift, alienation, and consequently, weakness of Muslim regimes.

The neo-orientalist school emerged in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. It was an attempt to remove the anomaly in the orientalist approach that could not explain why a Muslim society rebelled against the Shah. Thus, neo-orientalists sought to supplement and to restore the orientalist school rather than to refute its basic assumptions. They argue that the Iranian fundamentalist regime was the inevitable outcome of the revolution, since the masses initially intended to build a regime that was compatible with Islamic values. This school, in short, sought to generalize from the only one case of the Iranian experience in order to remove the weaknesses in the conventional, orientalist precepts without really altering its basic tenets regarding the lack of compatibility between Islam and democracy and the perpetual antagonism between Islamic culture and its Western counterpart. The Iranians, however, did not establish a fundamentalist regime but a modern Islamic Republic, which they call *Wilaiat Faqih*.<sup>41</sup> The latter means, as Edward Said explained,

<sup>39</sup> Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and Democracy Debate", n. 8, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Pipes, "Fundamentalist Muslims between America and Russia", *Foreign Affairs*, summer 1986, pp. 942-43.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York, 1981), p. 62; Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State* (London, 1989), pp. 9, 18.

a state that is controlled not by a philosopher king, but by a master of *fiqh*, a jurist or great leader, in which people have the major part in shaping policy. In the words of Zubaida:

[T]he explanation of the novelty of the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih is that its credibility and “thinkability” are facilitated by the conditions of the modern state and politics. What makes Khomeini’s theory plausible is the idea of people as a political force which can effect revolution and transformation. . . . This concept of the people as “the nation”, as a political force is distinctly modern. It is specified by modern political ideologies as an entity with a territory and a state. And the field in which this “people” can constitute a political force to displace the ruler is provided by the organization of the modern nation state.<sup>42</sup>

Orientalists as well as neo-orientalists, however, ignore any sort of modernity or novelty in Islamic societies in general and in the Iranian revolution in particular. Where reformists see progress and modernity, essentialists see reaction and fundamentalism. The latter argue that there is a certain, ontological reality that has always been part of the Islamic ancient and modern culture. It has existed independent of its observers, who can only observe it. Essentialists do not explain how their ideas have guided the American bureaucracy in formulating policies.

The contingencist approach, on the other hand, separates the moderates from fundamentalists and claims that the political conditions in Muslim states are not much different from those that exist in other Third World countries.<sup>43</sup> It criticizes the authoritarian regimes for brutally repressing groups that favour political reforms. According to this school, political stagnation, corruption, and repression have contributed to the ascendancy of Islamic fundamentalism. The repression of freedom of speech and political association has left the mosque as the only institution where people can gather, criticize the government, and organize themselves—as happened in the former German Democratic Republic during the Cold War era when opposition groups found the church the only place where they could gather for political discussion. Contingencists see the rise of fundamentalism, thus, as a direct consequence of the political reality in the ME. This school tries to understand the political and social dynamics behind fundamentalism, and feels that long-term social and political reforms could be stable.

The depiction of Islamic movements as radical, however, goes beyond this position since the movements are branded as being anti-Western and anti-modernist. One such writer Daniel Pipes, for example, depicts Muslims as “permanent” anti-democrats and terrorists. In his words: “Muslim countries [not only] have the

<sup>42</sup> Zubaida, *ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>43</sup> Advocates of the reformist school are: John Esposito, James Piscatori, and Edward Said, among others.

most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world, but that they always will.”<sup>44</sup> But if opposition to democracy in the Islamic world is inherent in the Islamic culture, then it would be a waste of time, effort, and money for those, in particular the US, to even try to promote it.

We should remember, however, that some of the non-democratic states in the region have become strategic outposts which serve Western interests. This is perhaps why they are viewed simply as Muslim countries and the cultural differences that distinguish them from each other are glossed over. Thus it is felt that what differentiates Iran from Saudi Arabia is that the former is a Shi'i state whereas the latter is a Sunni one. The subtle differences between Sunni and Shi'i are ignored; what is emphasized is how they relate to stability and violence. Sunnis are considered more “moderate” and less violent, while Shi'is are portrayed as people who have a self-image of martyrs and victims because their leader Ali, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad, was deprived from becoming the fourth Caliph of Islam and was assassinated.<sup>45</sup> Further, it is ignored that states like Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia have no cultural uniqueness as their borders have been artificially drawn during the colonial era. One suspects that their division makes it easier for the West to influence them. The sovereignty of these states is considered a “holy cow” that should be honoured perhaps, not out of any respect for the principle of self-determination,<sup>46</sup> but because it helps to keep them divided, which serves Western interests.

Jordan, for instance, provides a buffer zone between Israel and Iraq. Further, King Hussein's regime pursued a moderate policy towards Israel, restrained the Palestinian citizens of Jordan, and prevented militant Palestinian organizations from penetrating Jordan and attacking Israel from the Jordanian soil. There is no reason to believe that King Hussein's son, the present ruler, will pursue a different policy. The Jordanian valley constitutes the “soft stomach” of Israel where the latter is vulnerable to attack by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This is why Israel is deeply interested in preempting such attacks. It may be recalled that Israel treated the entry of Iraqi troops into Jordan in May 1967 as a declaration of war against it even before these troops had actually launched an attack against it. Again, in 1970, when King Hussein uprooted Palestinian organizations from Jordan, Israel, and the US threatened the use of force against Syria if it dared to attack Jordan. During the 1980s, the US supported Saddam Hussein as long as Iraq was locked in armed conflict with Iran, preventing the latter from exporting fundamentalist revolution to other oil producing countries of the Gulf. As soon as the war came to an end the US abandoned Saddam.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Pipes, 1990: 29. Quoted in Sadowski, *The New Orientalism and Democracy Debate*, n. 8, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> From the Shi'i point of view, Ali should have been the first Khalifah after Prophet Muhammad, yet his Khalifat was delayed because he was the youngest leader among the four *Khulafaa al-Rashideen*—Abu Bakr al-Saddiq, Umar bin al-Khattab, Othman bin Affan, and Ali bin Abi Taleb.

<sup>46</sup> If the principle of self-determination were important, then the US would respect the will of the Arab people to elect their leaders and would encourage democracy in the Middle East.

<sup>47</sup> See David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics and the Narrative of the Gulf War* (Boulder, 1993).



The truth is that the attack of Western scholars, orientalist and neo-orientalist is directed against the entire Middle Eastern society and not just against the radical and marginal Islamic groups. They regard it as a highly religious and consequently irrational, society which is drifting towards religious fundamentalism. In addition it is characterized by a hierarchical social structure, particularistic values, low level of social mobility, and elementary specialization and division of labour. The hierarchical social structure facilitates the development of patriarchal social relations and places effective command in the hands of those at the top of the social pyramid. Modern society, on the contrary, is highly universalistic, with a great degree of social mobility, a high degree of organic division of labour and specialization, and an individualistic social structure. As a result, the Middle Eastern traditional society is perceived as the very antithesis of the modern Western society.<sup>48</sup> Although these characteristics obtain in many other traditional, non-Muslim societies as well, Western scholars regard only Muslim societies as anti-Western, anti-secular, and anti-modernist.<sup>49</sup> They feel that while developing, non-Muslim countries could grow on Western lines. Muslim societies reject them completely choosing a Muslim civilization over the West.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, moreover, is perceived in the West as the primary threat to the stability of the ME and consequently as a major destabilizing element in the world. The declaration of *jihad* against Israel and the public announcements for the elimination of the Jewish state by countries like Iran and organizations like Hamas and Hizbullah, the call to renounce the peace treaty with Israel by Gama'al's Islamiya in Egypt, the Iranian anti-Western revolution, the capture of Americans as hostages by Iran and Lebanon, slogans like "death to America" and "Islam is the solution",<sup>50</sup> are all signs of an inevitable collision between the West and the Muslim civilization. The West fears the possibility of the emergence of a homogeneous Islamic empire that could extend from the Atlantic to the Gulf, include more than 250 million Muslims, and surround Israel. In the words of two experts:

Second only to the Soviet Union and considerably larger than Europe, Canada, China, or the United States. . . by 2000 it [Arab Empire] would have more people than either of the two superpowers. This state would contain almost two-thirds of the world's oil reserves. It would also have enough capital to finance its own economic and social development.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See Samuel Huntington, "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics", in C. Black, ed., *Modernization: The Concept and its Critics* (New York, 1976), p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> See Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage", *The Atlantic Monthly* (Boulder, CO), September 1990, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> The slogan "Islam is the Solution" indicates that there are acute problems in the Muslim world that need an immediate solution. Many Arabs recognize these problems, such as the Palestinian problem, the weakness against the West, inequality in the distribution of wealth, moral and social devaluation, etc., where Islam is proclaimed by the fundamentalists as the best solution, yet, of course, not the only one.

<sup>51</sup> Drysdale and Blake; quoted in Ian S. Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Power: Political Backwardness in Historical Perspective", *International Organization* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 51, no. 4, 1997, p. 653.

Thus the emergence of a united Arab empire, according to this line of thought, will inevitably fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Essentialists claim, however, that the conflict between the Muslims and the West is mainly the result of cultural differences and not of competition over material resources.<sup>52</sup> It is clear that their arguments are not based on realist premises, which emphasize the role of power in international politics, but on that of religion, i.e., ideology. Although they rely on the history of Islam from its origin in the seventh century to its zenith in the thirteenth century, these scholars do not comprehend the political events of that period in their historical context. In other words, these scholars, thus, make generalizations on the basis of their reading of the history of Islam and apply them mechanically to our times. An example of these generalizations is found in the writings of Bernard Lewis. In his words:

In the classic Islamic view, to which many Muslims are beginning to return, the world and all mankind are divided into two: the House of Islam, where the Muslim law and faith prevail, and the rest, known as the House of unbelief or the House of War, which it is the duty of Muslims ultimately to bring to Islam.<sup>53</sup>

First, Prof. Lewis does not clarify the number of Muslims who are beginning to return to classic Islam, whether there are different streams and, if so, what are the differences among them. Second, it is also not clear whether the causes for such a phenomenon are found exclusively within the Islamic society itself. We certainly cannot ignore the way Islamic societies try to shield themselves from the influence of globalization. But American hegemony seems to many Muslims as a new type of imperialism which, with its troops and multinationals, directly or indirectly, exerts enormous influence on Middle Eastern regimes.<sup>54</sup> Yet no one can deny that nations have the right to filter the impact of globalization that blurs cultural differences, transcends local traditions, and disseminates Western culture. Filtering the influence of globalization does not mean that the concerned society should live in isolation. There are many in the developing societies who would like to check rapid Americanization.

Third, if more and more Muslims are becoming religious, this does not mean that they are adopting fundamentalist Islam. We should not ignore the possibility that they might adopt a modern religious Islam. As mentioned before, post-1979 revolution Iran has developed a political system called *Wilayat Faqih* with several quasi-democratic notions which did not characterize any Muslim state in the past. Further, it is possible that Muslim Caliphs had divided the world into two, the House of Islam and the House of War. But one may wonder whether we can understand the present developments on the basis of notions derived from distant past,

<sup>52</sup> See Huntington, 1993, n. 7.

<sup>53</sup> See Lewis, n. 49, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> For a critique of American neo-imperialism in the Middle East see Al-Alem, n. 31, pp. 45–46. Al-Alem rejects American intervention in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern states, yet he upholds a secular, democratic, modern welfare state in the Middle East.

ignoring the features that separate the two eras. It is also doubtful whether Muslim nations define their interests in abstract terms of beliefs and fight against non-Muslim nations only because these are defined as the Enemies of God.<sup>55</sup>

The illustration of radical Islam is also prominent in the writings of Benjamin Barber. In his words:

*Jihad* is, I recognize, a strong term. In its mildest form, it betokens religious struggle on behalf of faith, a kind of Islamic zeal. In its stronger political manifestation, it means bloody holy war on behalf of partisan identity that is metaphysically defined and fanatically defended . . . *Jihad* is then a rabid response to colonialism and imperialism and their economic children, capitalism and modernity; it is diversity run amok, multiculturalism turned cancerous so that the cells keep dividing long after their division has ceased to serve the healthy corpus [Emphasis in original].<sup>56</sup>

Although Barber distinguishes between radical and moderate *jihad*, in both cases the outcome is similar: a struggle against capitalism, modernism, and the West. Holy war may start in its mildest form—religious struggle—but we cannot know where it may end. Yet the question arises whether nations define their interests in terms of religious struggle.<sup>57</sup> Why would Muslims decide to engage in a war, in the first place, when the balance of power is not in their favour? Even if Muslims still have the ambition to impose Islam on the non-Muslims, they are aware of their inferior power status *vis-à-vis* the West. Yet the main issue is not the desire on the part of Muslims to impose Islam on others but whether the West can keep its control on oil resources in the ME. The stability of the global capitalist system has a lot to do with the smooth supply of oil from the ME. The US fears that it might lose its hold on the Gulf states if these states undergo political reforms. This was the lesson they learned in Iran after the revolution.

It is also a mistake to think that the term *jihad* has only one meaning—holy war, the way it was used at the beginning of the history of Islam. Since then the term

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, n. 49, p. 48. To prophesy the behaviour of an empire that does not exist on the basis of verses from the Koran that are given to different interpretations, is too ambitious and unscientific a task. Positivist Weberian theorists in social sciences adopt the term instrumental rationality. Accordingly, people are perceived as rational agents who have defined preferences and employ the most efficient means that help them to realize their interests. A scholar who employs this method of research should put himself in the shoes of the decision-maker and analyze from there the rationale behind her/his behaviour. See Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology* (Secaucus, NJ, 1993).

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York, 1996), pp. 9, 11.

<sup>57</sup> During the First Gulf War, it was not Khomeini who declared war against Iraq, on the contrary, it was Saddam who initiated this war with the encouragement of Israel and the US that supplied him with weapons. When Iran seemed weak the US and Israel sold it weapons in order to keep the war going. In other words, they sold weapons for the sake of continuing the war; the continuity of fighting was an objective by itself. The Irangate investigation in the mid-1980s examined the rationales behind this US policy.

has come to incorporate many other useful meanings, of which holy war is only one. The other, more useful meaning of the term, is to be diligent or to strive to improve one's life conditions or the political and economic conditions of the whole society. Essentialist scholars, however, insist that *jihad* means holy war, and nothing but the holy war. They also view Islamic fundamentalism as a monolithic movement. They do not distinguish between Muslims and Islamists or moderate Muslims and the radicals. As Prof. Esposito argues:

For a number of reasons it [fundamentalism] tells us everything and yet, at the same time, nothing. . . All those who call for a return to foundational beliefs or the fundamentals of a religion may be called fundamentalists. . . this could include all practicing Muslims, who accept the literal word of God.<sup>58</sup>

Distinguishing between potential Muslim rage against the West, on the one hand, and direct threat and conflicting material interests, on the other, requires policy-makers in the West to understand how their policy is received by the people in the ME. Till date, Western states are sensitive to the needs and problems of the local authoritarian regimes. The people are perceived as irrational, traditional, and anti-modern. The essentialists believe that the West has nothing in common with the masses or with popular Islamic regimes that draw their legitimacy from the masses. This leads the US to channel its efforts in favour of the authoritarian regimes and against popular Islamic movements. In this sense, a regime that founds its legitimacy on mass public support will reflect the same irrational values that are inherent in the Islamic culture. Focusing on a small *elite*, on the other hand, simplifies handling of the culture and enables the West to realize its interests smoothly. No wonder the US supports regimes in the ME which are weak (in terms of popular legitimacy) and dependent on the West for their survival.

## Conclusion

In the article I tried to show that structural factors do not help in understanding the American foreignpolicy in the ME. It is the essentialist discourse that guides

<sup>58</sup> Esposito, n. 3, p. 7. Since the establishment of Israel, religious Jewish parties have always been part of the government's coalition. Parties like Agodas Yesrael and the National Religious Party (NRP) were only once not part of the coalition under Prime Minister Rabin in 1992 because of the secular ideology of this government, and its peace initiative that was fraught with withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Radical religious elements unofficially announced "*Rodef*" fiat against Rabin, which means that according to the Jewish religion this man betrayed his people and he should be killed. Supporters of these parties illustrated Rabin in Nazi SS uniforms during one of their demonstrations against the government peace policy in 1994 in Jerusalem. These parties are not only perceived as moderate, but they are part of the Israeli political centre/right and they are members of the coalition again in Netanyahu's government. Notice that Jewish and Muslim fundamentalist movements call for a similar, yet opposite outcome—both claim that the whole Holy Land belongs to them and they exclude the other side totally.

the thinking of policy-makers. Ironically, it seems that political reforms are likely to occur in states which are not under the strong influence of the US. Iran, for example, could not develop democratic notions when it was an American ally, since the US supported a traditional, authoritarian regime.

However, there is no clash of interests between the West and the ME over material resources. On the basis of some abstract ideological notions the essentialists try to make out a case for a conflict between the two which is not likely to occur. They claim that the ideology of Islam is the main cause of the conflict between the West and the ME which does not seem to hold true in all cases.

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