Beyond the Crusades: Why Samuel Huntington (and Bin Ladin) are Wrong

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Samuel Huntington's 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" and his subsequent book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) may seem prescient at first glance. Declaring the onset of "a new phase in global history," Huntington defined "the fundamental sources of conflict" in the current world, not as economic or ideological in nature, but "cultural." For Huntington, civilizations each have a primordial cultural identity so that the "major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures." He warned: "culture and cultural identities...are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world...The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993: 22; 1996: 20, 28, 29). "The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future," Huntington predicted, and the two civilizations that are of particular importance in this narrative of battles and futures are Islam and the West.

For Huntington, Islam and the West are construed as "highly integrated civilizations," as bounded entities in which sedimented essences inhere in monolithic groups. Today I want to focus on three problems underlying such a vision.

First, the sedimented essences version of "civilization" or "culture" ignores the specific historical processes and particular power relations that have given rise to the recent phenomenon of radical religious expression. Second, the clash of civilization's story rides roughshod over the diversity of views and the experiences of contention among Muslims. Communities of argument arise over what makes a Muslim a Muslim, what Islam means, and what, if any, its political role should be. Third, Huntington's analysis neglects the terrains of solidarity and fluidity that exist between Muslims and non-Muslims, the ways in which political communities of various sorts have depended on the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. Let me elaborate each of these points.

First, to take into account historical processes would mean to identify the recent and global dimensions of radical religious expression. "Fundamentalism," as radical religious expression is sometimes termed, is not exclusive to Islam. Nor does it have its roots in age-old traditions. Current Islamicist movements are part of a global phenomenon that originates in the late 1970s, and they share with other contemporary movements two key similarities: a) they resuscitate,

invent, or construct an essentialist understanding of political identity based, at least in part, on ascription; b) although they have important antecedents, they have emerged as a potent contemporary political force at the same time that international market pressures weakened the economic sovereignty of states and undermined their roles as guarantors of citizens' welfare.

The story may by now be a familiar one: in the 1970s, states began withdrawing economically, privatizing property, reducing or eliminating subsidies, deregulating prices, and ceasing to provide services to which people had become accustomed, felt entitled--and needed. As the state has retreated economically in the Middle East, Islamicist movements have tended to fill in the gaps, providing goods and services states do not proffer (Al-Naqeeb 1991; Beinin and Stork 1997; Chaudhry 1997; Henry and Springborg 2001; Medani 1997; Sadowski 1987; Singerman 1996; Vitalis 1997; Wickham 1997, 2002; Yamani 2002). Egypt was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to initiate liberalization measures in 1973. Although such measures could be deemed successful during the oil boom years, they were disastrous in the bust period of the mid-1980s. Liberalization measures exposed Egyptians to a number of imported goods and luxury items at the same time that oil revenues and privatization policies generated a new, American-oriented "parvenu" class (Sadowski 1987). This new class enjoyed a lifestyle that aroused widespread resentment among the urban poor and middle classes. Liberalization programs created markets, but they also enhanced perceptions of corruption, widened income disparities, and fostered considerable economic suffering. Liberalization also removed safety nets that guaranteed people some security. Rising unemployment, decreases in subsidies, housing problems, and population explosions all contributed to the glaring gap between rich and poor. Strikes grew more common in the 1980s, food riots were "a frequent worry" among government officials, and middle and lower class citizens reported economic anxieties (Sadowski 1987).

The undermining of the state as the vehicle of economic development also subverted its role as the carrier of abstract communal solidarities, and it was in this context, often termed "globalization," that politicized religious movements started being mobilized on the basis of a complex blend of ascriptive and behavioral identifications. What is common to most of these movements is that they express anxieties about corroded values and the loss of communal attachments. They register the "moral panic" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 5) of citizens longing for a state or community capable of protecting and providing for them.

In the Middle Eastern context, Islamicist movements have captured this popular discontent, in part by delivering concrete economic benefits to constituents. They have devised disciplined, effective, skillful organizations for channeling resources and providing goods and services. Some

offer housing, books, and health care no longer (or never) provided by the state. Islamicist movements also organize affective attachments in the wake of the failure of Arab states to deliver on Arab nationalist promises.

The appeal of Islamicist groups, then, can be historically situated in the changing relations of global capital (and the concomitant shift from nationalist abstractions to religious ones). Invoking a "clash of civilizations" argument is also, as the political scientist Chalmers Johnson notes, "a way of evading responsibility for the 'blowback' that US imperial projects have generated" (Johnson, *The Nation*, October 15, 2001). Possible sources of "blowback" include the widely shared views that the United States serves as a proxy for Israel, is responsible for the decade of sanctions against Iraqis, shores up corrupt dictators, stations troops in Saudi Arabia specifically, and upholds double standards between official commitments to democracy and equality, on the one hand, and actual political activities, on the other. Current global economic arrangements are also implicated in beliefs about US imperial projects; they are understood as bringing wealth to the United States and its perceived institutional surrogates, the IMF and World Bank, while making many parts of the world more miserable and destitute.

The fact that economically incapacitated states in the region encourage expressions of popular discontent in forms that deflect attention away from domestic leaders' incompetence may also explain the elective affinity between state discourses and some aspects of Islamicist movements. The available idioms through which experiences of common belonging to a people become institutionalized in the post-Fordist, post-colonial world are confined to what the state will tolerate and what the Islamicists have won. Thus demonstrations of Muslim piety combine with consensual understandings of anti-American and pro-Palestinian solidarities in officials' speeches and in mass demonstrations. Islamicism has become a coherent anti-imperialist doctrine and a way of re-establishing community. It offers visions of an equitable, just, socially responsible way of life, much as the failed, discredited Arab nationalist regimes of the 1950s and 60s did.

To some extent the success of the Islamicist movements also has to be attributed to the state's elimination of leftist opposition by means of incarceration, torture, and cooptation. In Egypt, for example, the regimes of Nasir and Sadat worked actively to demobilize the working class. Sadat found tactical allies among the Muslim Brotherhood and among the newly growing radical Islamic movements in universities. He released imprisoned Muslim Brothers in 1972-73, and encouraged them to attack leftists, whom he regarded as his major political adversary (Waterbury 1983; Sadowski 1987). In Yemen, unification between North and South was followed

by the Northern ruling party's consistent assault on its Southern Socialist partners. In 1992-93, there were approximately 150-160 assassination attempts against members of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP--most of them carried out by self-identified radical Islamicists who were encouraged financially and politically by the regime.[2]

Viewing the emergence and appeal of Islamicist movements historically thus compels us to come to terms with the post-Fordist economic world in which the state's economic sovereignty has been undermined globally with consequences for the forms of solidarity and expressions of community currently politicizing citizens in a number of places. A historical account also requires us to recognize the absence of alternative visions of community and authority, as leaders failed to deliver both on their pan-Arab promises and to produce effective state-centered projects for development. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the global decline of Soviet ideology as an alternative paradigm to liberal capitalism, Islamicism provides a critical vision of the world and a sense of hope for some people. Islamicist positions on social justice, based on mechanisms of redistribution such as the Islamic *zakat* taxes, avoid the radical land reform projects of old; they also tend to respect the concept of private property and encourage profit as an appropriate outcome for entrepreneurial activity (Sadowski 1997; Kepel 2002). Islamicists can thus appeal to the middle classes and to the urban poor, even though the credibility of Islamicist solutions to economic problems has been undermined by the failure of some Islamicist firms to deliver on their financial promises.[3]

Part Two: Contention Among Muslims

Despite the success of Islamicists in providing the adversarial idioms and resonant political critiques, the struggle among nominally Muslim citizens and Islamicist adherents is as pronounced as the solidarities an Islamicist adversarial politics has fostered. Being "Muslim" might signify a set of religious beliefs, an ascriptive attachment, a "cultural" identification, a state classification, a set of recognizable activities, or none of the above. There are those who see a separation of mosque and state as fundamental, and those who advocate their conjuncture. There are those who think the *shari`a* should be *the* source of legislation, those who view it as *a* source, and those who wish it were irrelevant to contemporary law. There are countries where the `ulama or religious elite is independent of the state, places where mosque sermons are controlled by the state, and places where the `ulama is coterminous with the state. There are, in short, vigorous communities of argument and plural varieties of social and political practice. This plurality makes any invocation of a single political doctrine of Islam empirically untenable and theoretically meaningless. We have to keep this sense of variety and plurality in mind when

thinking about political patterns and the terrains of solidarity that might animate future political life.[4]

Part Three: Terrains of Solidarity: The Modernity of States, The Rule of Law, and Human Rights

Rather than discussing reified categories such as Islam and democracy in general, we should talk, as the theorist Gudrun Krämer encourages us to do, about "Muslims living and theorizing under specific historical circumstances" (Krämer 1997: 72). This may seem obvious, but it is often hard to do, in part because many Muslim authors represent their "views as 'the position of Islam'" (Krämer 1997: 72).

In addition, some Islamicists may end up adopting the strategic option of democracy because leaders calculate that it is in their interest to do so. Such rational calculations explain how the theologically-minded Belgian Catholic movement, for example, despite members' theocratic inclinations and their lack of commitment to democracy, ended up supporting democratic institutions (Kalyvas 1998). In other words, a discussion of ideas, values or shared political commitments may exaggerate the importance of particular ways of thinking while underestimating the salience of common strategic interests and trade-offs--the familiar practices of calculating costs and benefits, which many political leaders who share the same vocation (but perhaps not the same values) *do* when making decisions.

Keeping these points in mind, let me suggest three shared understandings that might constitute a terrain of solidarity between Islamicists and liberals (I claim membership in neither group): First, conservative `ulama and moderate Muslim Brothers (in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Yemen) hold ideas that are fundamentally modern (Krämer 1997: 74; see also Chakrabarty 2000).[5] Implementing the *shari`a*, according to these theorists, means building a state whose common bureaucratic institutions are designed to provide goods and services in return for citizens' allegiance and obedience. Humans, endowed by God with reason, have the ability to interpret correctly the purposes of the *shari`a* and therefore to define the precise contours and functional tasks state institutions will assume. In this light, the adoption of democratic practices or categories may be "acceptable, recommended, or even mandatory," as long as these do not contravene Islamic principles (Krämer 1997: 75).

Second, then, is the admissibility of democratic norms and procedures in the process of constructing institutions. A fundamental concern of many contemporary Muslims is the need to

check the arbitrary powers of leaders and institute the rule of law, and strict application of the *shari`a* is seen by many as a way of forefending against tyranny while ensuring procedural justice. Whatever problems one might see in this proposition, criticisms of despotism and corruption animate the works of both radical and reform-minded Islamicists (as well as those of secularists). Identifying tyranny as a key spiritual and political problem on the grounds that it treats men as gods when there is only one God, provides the justification for rendering dictators and those who work for them apostates.[6] Although some groups still advocate the restoration of a "caliphate," many groups, including the Muslim Brothers, use the term in ways analogous to a modern president who is entrusted to execute God's law as a fallible human agent and an accountable, political representative of the Muslim community. Thus many Muslim authors claim that the ideal Islamic state is a *dawla madaniyya* (a civil state) rather than a theocracy ruled by the `ulama or an authoritarian state ruled by the military. In Yemen, moderate Islamicists also stress the importance of a *shura* whose actual duties look less like the Prophet Muhammad's version of a consultative body and more like a Western Parliament. (The key figure here is Yasin `Abd al-`Aziz 1999: 63-116.) Many authors in Yemen and elsewhere accept the importance of a separation of powers in which the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary keep each other in check.

Third, moderate, pragmatic Islamicists and many self-identified Muslim authors also express concerns about protecting human rights (although there are also lively debates on the extent to which the importation of allegedly Western understandings of human rights contradict the *shari`a* and/or are used opportunistically by Western NGOs, journalists, and governments to justify intervention).[7] Especially in their role as oppositional political figures, moderate Islamicists have demanded the safeguarding of individual rights and civil liberties from government intrusion, and the human right to live free from repression and torture.

Conclusions:

The vast majority of people in the Middle East probably never ceased to consider themselves Muslim, even at the apogee of secular nationalist movements. But before the 1970s, most Muslims did not seem to identify primarily as Muslims, or rather, that identity did not override other forms of *political* identification. Disillusionment with the performance of states in the 1970s and the creation of parvenu classes that exemplified the ostentatious excesses of the "haves" in contrast to the impoverishment of the "have nots" generated widespread discontent. This discontent was exacerbated with the debt crisis of the 1980s, the decline in the price of oil, and the IMF-imposed restructuring projects that limited state expenditures. At a time when the

distributive capabilities of states were undermined and leaders were increasingly perceived to be venal and corrupt, the popularity of Islamicists movements rose considerably. The messages-calls for social equity, political transparency and accountability, and moral piety-were resonant, critical alternatives that gave many a sense of belonging to a common political project with anonymous but like-minded others. It may be difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between economic suffering and political Islamicist movements, but we might acknowledge that fundamentalisms are "intimately connected with material conditions and disaffection" without arguing that such conditions fully explain "the appeal of fundamentalist ideas" (Euben 1999: 89).

To focus on the economic incentives, discursive content, and political-affective impulses that have underpinned Islamicist projects is not to suggest that there is a single, unified political doctrine of Islam. Islamicists differ from non-Islamicists and from one another. There are pragmatically minded Muslim Brotherhood adherents and radically minded, militantly inclined Islamicists. There are secularists and pious practitioners. Reifying "Islam" not only denies the empirical world of plurality and diversity, it also proves politically dangerous, by making "Islam" into an object rather than a set of polyvalent activities whose practitioners have divergent visions, fantasies, understandings, and interests.

Moreover, the moderate, pragmatic Islamicists have come to articulate recognizable aspects of a modern state and a democratic politics: government accountability, the rule of law, political participation, the separation of powers, and the protection of human rights. As Gudrun Krämer points out, despite these explicit commitments, Muslim Brothers are not, strictly speaking liberals, if "liberalism" also means "religious indifference" (Krämer 1997: 80). But their moral vocabularies, expressions of entitlement, and political practices share important characteristics with liberal formulations of democratic institution building.

Thinking about shared terrains between Islamicists and non-Islamicists and between Muslims and non-Muslims does not mean riding roughshod over important disagreements, nor does it require "fudging" consensus where consensus does not reside. If democrats are to take their own commitments to democratic political life seriously, then they (we) have to embrace the variety and agonistic, contentious politics that allows for differences to thrive.

Focusing exclusively on Islamicists, moreover, does a disservice to other groups and individuals in the Middle East whose ideals may be less resonant with current public opinions, but whose

practices forge the conditions of possibility through which future political life may also get created.

Finally and more generally, by ignoring historical processes and specific relations of political power, the treatment of culture in political science has downplayed the heterogeneous ways people experience the social order within and among groups, while exaggerating the commonality, constancy, and permanence of intra-group beliefs and values. As a result, cultural essentialist explanations of political outcomes such as ethnic or religious violence tend to naturalize categories of groupness, rather than exploring the conditions under which such experiences of groupness come to seem natural when they do (See Wedeen 2002).

Endnotes

[1] This essay has benefited from discussions with Nadia Abu El-Haj, Saba Mahmood, Jar Allah `Umar, Moishe Postone, Don Reneau, and Anna Wuerth. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the United Nations, the University of Maine, Bangor, and to Chicago alumnae. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Jar Allah `Umar and to Muhammad Qahtan.

[2] Interviews with Yemeni Socialist Party leaders, Fall 2001; see also the interview with Tariq al-Fadli in *al-Quds al-`Arabi*, November 10 2001, reprinted in the YSP's weekly *al-Thawri*, January 3, 2002. Al-Fadli was a well-known Yemeni Islamic Jihad movement leader who joined the ruling General People's Congress party in the mid-1990s.

[3] See, for example, Gilles Kepel's description (2002) of the banking crash in Egypt in the late 1980s, pp. 279-281. Thanks are owed to Anna Wuerth for suggesting these passages to me.

[4] Recognizing the fact of diversity does not mean avoiding generalizations, but it may help identify the kinds of generalizations that can plausibly be made.

[5] I am obviously indebted to Gudrun Krämer's essay for my Part Three. Her work introduced me to the works of `Abd al-Qadir `Awda, *Al-Islam wa-awda`una al-siyasiyya* and *Al-Islam wa-awda`una al-qanuniyya* (Cairo, n.d.). `Ali Jarisha, *I`lan dusturi islami* (al-Mansura, 1985) and *Al-Mashru`iyya al-islamiyya al-`ulya*, 2nd ed. (al-Mansura, 1986). Muhammad `Imara, *Al-Dawla al-islamiyya bayna al-`almaniyya wa al-sulta al-diniyya* (Cairo and Beirut 1988); Muhammad Salim al-`Awwa, *Fi al-nizam al-siyasi lil-dawla al-islamiyya*, new ed. (Cairo and Beirut 1989); Fahmi Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-sultan: humum islamiyya mu`asira* (Cairo, 1982); and *Al-Islam wa al-dimuqratiyya*. My own research on Yemen has led me to study the

writings of Yasin `Abd al-`Aziz, *Adwa' `ala haqiqa al-musawa* (San`a' 1996) and *Al-Hurriya wa al-shura, dirasatani fi al-fiqh al-siyasi* (San`a' 1999). I am also beholden to al-Qardawi's television commentaries on al-Jazeera.

[6] Critiques of dictatorship among Islamicists also use vocabulary that does not carry religious connotations, such as despotism (istibdad) and oppression (zulm).

[7] The status of women, the rights of gay people and of non-Muslim minorities, and the freedom of academic research remain fraught topics. In Yemen, the right of private individuals to retaliate against a crime or to settle accounts privately (qisas) is also a particularly charged issue.

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