Democracy, Islam and the Middle East

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Islam and Islamism:
Western Attitudes Since 9/11

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In March of 1996, the Moshe Dayan Center, at Tel Aviv University, convened an international conference on Islamism, later publishing the proceedings under the title "The Islamism Debate." As I reread this volume recently, I was truly amazed at how much has changed since the book appeared. There is no mention, for example, of Al-Qaida, Osama Bin-Laden, and others that are now household names. Then, the debate focused on whether Islamism could accommodate itself to democracy, not whether Islamism could mutate into mass terrorism. In our deliberations we argued over whether you could ever tell moderates from extremists, not how you could tell extremists from suicidal terrorists. In Israel itself, it will be recalled, we had only just experienced the first waves of suicide bombings in the spring of 1996.

There is little doubt that the events of 9/11 have rendered our past debates obsolete. In fact, I posit, 9/11 effectively ended the Islamism debate. It has been replaced within Islam by a debate conducted at a much higher volume, involving a far wider range of participants and viewpoints, and with much higher stakes.

But first let us revisit the original Islamism debate and its shifting fortunes. In 1996 the situation in the Arab Middle East seemed tenuous. Societies were polarized between the regimes and the Islamists, and it seemed like an even contest. A civil war raged in Algeria. Domestic terrorism plagued Egypt. Saudi Arabia was said to be endangered. Many analysts believed that one regime or another might fall. At the same time the crux of the Islamism debate was this at that time: could one or should one identify and separate more moderate Islamists from their extremist brethren and somehow integrate them in the system, so as to prevent a general destabilization.

In the following years this question dropped from the agenda for a very simple reason. The regimes themselves managed to eliminate the Islamist threat, and it did so not by accommodating the moderate Islamists for sharing power with them, they did so by crushing the openly violent Islamists and punishing the others by vigorous use of the secret police and the judiciary. In Algeria the Islamist insurgency was defeated. In Egypt the terrorism ended. In Saudi Arabia the opposition was sent into exile or bought off through Islamic charities. No threatened regime shared power with the Islamists, yet no regime fell. It was precisely this success of the state in fording the Islamist bid for power that set the stage for the emergence of Al-Qaida.

Al-Qaida is an adaptation of the Islamist remnant to a situation of a checkmate in two important respects: its own composition and its identification of the enemy. First Al-Qaida recognized that the attempt by individual Islamist movements to seize power independently of one another had failed. These movements had tried to win wider support by cloaking themselves in local nationalism. Many of the 1996 participants harked on the theme of the individual national character of each Islamist movement. The important thing to understand about Islamism, so the argument went, was its diversity, its adaptation to local circumstances. Its real strength lies in its deep roots in local nationalism. In 1992 Edward Djerejian, who was then an assistant secretary at the State Department, delivered his famous House speech on Islamism, representing the official US understanding of the phenomenon. He said: "We detect no monolithic or coordinated international effort behind these movements. What we do see are believers living in different countries, placing renewed emphasis on Islamic principles and governments accommodating Islamist political activity to varying degrees and in different ways."

In other words, Islamism was not a transnational phenomenon. It was just a variety of nationalism pursued in different ways in different countries. But in most places this Islamist embrace of local nationalism failed to bring the Islamists any closer to power. Despite the expectations of many experts, the repackaging of Islamism as Palestinian or Egyptian nationalism in Islamic guise did not turbo-charge these movements. Of course, many movements have not abandoned this strategy, but Al-Qaida's adaptation has been to return to the transnational pan-Islamism that worked so well in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Al-Qaida has managed through all the means afforded by globalized communications to create a transnational network composed of Saudis, Afghans, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Algerians, Moroccans,

Chechnians, Indonesians, and so on. The idea is that Islamists who have nowhere succeeded in seizing power by relying on domestic support might do so through alliances with transnational Islamist muscle. Second, Al-Qaida redefined the enemy. In the early 1990s some Islamists hoping to win broader support or international sympathy, cast themselves as supporters of democracy against authoritarian regimes. They did not want an Islamic state, they said, unless it were a democratic state.

The argument never carried very far because it was not particularly sincere, but in any event the tactic failed. The West did not come to look upon the Islamist movements as the equivalent of democratic reform movement of Eastern Europe. Instead, the West acquiesced in the suppression of Islamist movements by regimes. In Al-Qaida we witness the perfect adaptation to the situation created by the Islamists' failure to persuade the West, threatened the West instead. Al-Qaida has abandoned the attempt to assault regimes directly on their own home turf. Its method is to strike at Western and especially American targets on just about any turf. And even when we met back in 1996, there was evidence of this possibility in the first World Trade Center bombing. But most experts on Islamism preferred to regard that episode as an aberration, as an isolated incident, not as a portent of much worse to come. And so no framework was constructed in which to interpret it.

Looking back to the 1996 proceedings, I cannot say that I see anything that anticipated the emergence of these adaptations now associated with Al-Qaida, the emergence of a transnational Islamist network identifying the US government and the American people as its enemies combined with a willingness to employ massive and indiscriminate terrorism. The proceedings of other conferences and the findings of other experts fared even worse. Most of them actually denied the existence of an Islamist international and the potential for worst-case-scenario terrorism. (I do not have to name the names or quote the quotes here; they can be found in the chapter "Islam obscured" in my book, *Ivory Towers on Sand* [Washington, DC: 2001].)

The attacks on 9/11, I believe, effectively ended the Islamism debate. Of course, it continues to persist among some academics who are keen to show that their paradigms did not rule out a 9/11, even if they did not anticipate one. Some of these exercises are more persuasive then others. In the late 1990s there developed in France a school of thought arguing that we had entered a post-Islamist stage following the failure of the Islamists to seize power. Olivier Roy's book appeared with the title, *The Failure of*

Political Islam. Another appeared with the subtitle, "The Rise and Decline of Political Islam." After 9/11 some of these academics came under criticism for having prematurely dismissed Islamism from the stage. But the French post-Islamists have rebounded with persuasive rejoinders to their critics. And the fact is that the French post-Islamists never ruled out the possibility of Islamists resorting to international terrorism, precisely as a consequence of political failure and decline. They also had rather complex social theories about the origins of Islamism that have not been disproved. I happen to think rather highly of several of these books. The Americans fared much worse. This is because many of them explicitly dismissed the possibility of Islamist mega-terrorism. They tended to favor a highly selective, arguably even an autistic reading of Islamist discourse, and their theorizing about Islamism never had a strong interpretation of its origins beyond banalities about frustration. Books like *The Islamic Threat, Myth and Reality* and *Shattering the Myth — Islam beyond Violence* easily interacted with end of history triumphalism to promote complacency.

And so, the post 9/11 salvage attempts by these American academics have been very unpersuasive. I think Francis Fukayama has made a more interesting attempt to suggest that radical Islam may usher in the modern despite itself. Now, all this is academic posturing, the rush to preserve credibility in the midst of rapid change. Its best expression is this quote by an American professor of Islamic history: "On September 11, 2001, while a substantial number of analysts in this scarily world could honestly claim that they had seen the handwriting on the wall, even if the message had not included the date, place and time of the actual attacks, very few people in the policy community could make the same claim." This is patently and demonstrably untrue. In fact, the opposite is true. There was no one in academe and in large pockets of the policy community who saw the handwriting on the wall. And I bring the quote only to suggest that the debate as it persists in the rarified corners of academe is revolving less around Islamism and more about the preservation of credibility and claims of clairvoyance in a guild whose practitioners are preoccupied with retaining or gaining status.

But I now come to the really interesting part. Since 9/11 focus of real debate has shifted dramatically. The Islamism debate was not about something called Islam per se. All of us who were parties to it agreed that we were debating the characteristics of a subset of contemporary Islam. Some of us defined the subset differently, some of us made it larger or

smaller, but we shared a basic presumption that we were not debating the essence of Islam. 9/11 changed that. The great debate is no longer limited to Islamism. It has been extended to a debate over Islam at large and now many are contributing who never took part in the much narrower and more specialized and even professional debate over Islamism. Everyone from Francis Fukayama to Paul Johnson, from George W. Bush to Pat Robertson is weighing in on whether Islam is a religion of peace or a moral blockage, whether the prophet Muhammad was a proto-democrat or a proto-terrorist. And if the debate continues to widen, the crucial question is just what those who some claim to professional expertise should do to influence and guide it.

The Islam debate, of course, has a very long history in Europe, a shorter one in America. But whatever side of the Atlantic hosts the debate, its main characteristic has always been this: the positions taken by the protagonists have more to do with political, intellectual or theological imperatives than with any new analysis of Islam's history, theology or present reality. In the more distant past those imperatives led many of the protagonists to blacken Islam. Today they lead many of them to whiten it. Needless to say, there have been exceptions in every period. The result has always been a debate that gravitates from one extreme to the other and, unfortunately, I would argue that the role of today's academics has actually been to push the debate to its extremities rather than pull it to the center.

How do they do this? By their collective response to 9/11. Immediately after 9/11 Western publics asked this question: these terrorists were Moslems claiming to act with the sanction of Islam — true or false? The objective answer to the question should have run as follows: 9/11 is an issue that is being debated among Moslems and we are following that debate. What is true is that the 9/11 terrorists believed they were acting in accord with Islam and that there are other Moslems, it is impossible to tell how many, who think the same way. They believe this to be the proper fulfillment of the duty of Jihad. Let there be no doubt, however, that other Moslems, again impossible to say how many, who disagree and here is their reasoning. To my mind these few things are all that a scholar could responsibly say about Islam and 9/11, no more, no less. Instead, the major intellectual enterprise of scholars post 9/11 has been to place the event outside any extent understanding of Islam, i.e., to replicate the isolated incident interpretation of the first World Trade Center bombing. 9/11 relied on no valid interpretation of Islam, we are told, and even represented a total distortion of the Islamic

concept of Jihad. In very many cases this denial reached bizarre proportions with assorted experts declaring that Jihad, just to quote an example, must be understood as a struggle without arms; or to quote another, that it means working toward moral betterment of society. A similar attack was followed by US officials who were anxious, lest the warm tear be interpreted in the Moslem world as a war against Islam. And so, various governments' spokespersons began to pronounce on what did and did not constitute Islam.

In his speech to Congress on 20 September, 2001, George Bush set the tone: "The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by the vast majority of Moslem clerics, a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. Islam's teachings are good and peaceful and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith." This statement might be well described as the Bush *Fatwa*. In effect, the scholars and the US government combined to legitimize Islam itself as a matter of domestic debate by their tireless efforts to characterize it as a religion of peace. It was an unfortunate mistake because when professors and politicians begin to make *ex-cathedra* assertions about a religion not their own, they invite a wide range of others, including public intellectuals and Christian religious leaders, to do the same. When I ask myself who could have exercised more restraint, who could have provided balance, who could have kept the 9/11 agony from being transformed into a futile debate on the merits and demerits of Islam as a religion, I answer: the professors and the politicians. The professors because of their ostensible commitment to intellectual distance, and the politicians because of the separation of religion and state which would put a damper on religious speculation by national leaders. But instead of showing that restraint, they spoke in ways that answer their own political and institutional needs and that satisfied their own constituencies. They should not be surprised when others who have different political and institutional needs take positions diametrically opposed to their own. A Harvard professor saying the Jihad must be a struggle without arms and a Christian tele-preacher calling the prophet Muhammad a warlord are really two sides of the same coin.

The Islamism debate could have evolved in an original direction following 9/11. I refer to what has become known as the issue of wahabism. In Bush's speech (as above) he called Al-Qaida a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. Precisely such terms were once widely used in the Moslem world to characterize the entire Wahabi

expression of Islam, all within living memory. Al-Qaida might have well been an extremely small subset of something as vast as Islam, but it was bound to be a much larger subset of something called Saudi Islam or wahabism. Especially given the fact that Osama and 15 of the 19 terrorists on 9/11 were Saudis raised within its cultural perimeters. And given the extremely aggressive efforts of Saudi Arabia, its royal family and its religious institutions to promote their Islam as a kind of normative Islam, which is an effort fueled by vast resources, 9/11 could hardly be said to have emerged from some far-flung corner of the Moslem world. On the contrary: it originated at its contemporary center. This is the sort of debate which professional students of Islamism and Saudi Arabia should have taken a clear lead in. It would revolve around the question, has Saudi Islam encouraged within its mainstream the categories of thought that infuse members of Al-Qaida? It did not happen and it has not happened. Prior to 9/11 exactly two books appeared that dealt with the subject, one of them by an Israeli, and since 9/11 nothing more has been published except a problematic book by a talented journalist. Given the closeness of the US-Saudi relationship over the past 50 years, it is astonishing how much of it has been taken for granted, how little regular journalistic reportage has come out of the kingdom and how little American academic attention has been devoted to the inner dynamics of Saudi society and its religious practices. No debate has been developed and I have an explanation as to why. Quite simply, the Saudis themselves have precluded it by their customary generosity, this time lavished upon Western academe. When you have a Harvard program in Islamic law funded by Saudi sources, including the Bin-Laden family; when you have programs in Arab studies at Harvard and Berkeley funded with Saudi largess; when you have the Saudis willing to bestow six-figure Faisal and Fahd prizes on leading Arab-American professors, you have them in place. An entire raft of incentives for deterring America's Middle East experts and academic empire builders from making Saudi Arabia a subject of close study. Those who get do not talk; those who do not get still hope to get and they don't talk either. The silence of the experts in the public debate over the relationship of Al-Qaida to Saudi Islam and the Wahabi legacy has been an immense disappointment.

Earlier I noted that the Islamism debate had ended and that it has been supplanted by an Islam debate to which experts have had little useful to contribute, though some actually added fuel to the polemical fire. But I

have to qualify this statement; it relates above all to the Arab world. Somewhere between 9/11, the *intifada*, ethnic politics, the Arab state, the Arab street and Saudi money, the Islamism debate died its death. It has been replaced by the debate sparked by the *Arab Human Development Report* [see Nadan, pp. 134-152 for a review of the Report] and by Bernard Lewis' book, *What Went Wrong?* The issue is no longer whether to integrate or exclude Islamists. They were already put out of play by the regimes, and now they are going to bear the brunt of the war on terror. The great debate of this decade will be the developmental debate: what can Arab regimes do in partnership with the West to reform and jumpstart their economies and educational systems? Experts on Hamas and Hizbullah will continue to eke out a living, such movements survive in small power vacuums and live on as parasites on the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Our debates over the future of 300 million Arabs will be much less focused on how to include Islamists in the regional system, and far more focused on how to include Arabs in the globalized system. Still, the Islamism debate could be revived, and perhaps is being revived right now by changes in Turkey and Iran. In both countries we see a range of political expression far wider than that of the Arab world, greater self-confidence in dealing with the wider world and systems that have been innovative not so much in repression as in accommodation. Such developments will provide us with ample opportunities to revive the Islamism debate at several removes from the Qaida conundrum and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The rules and lessons of the Arab Middle East may not necessarily apply here. At least one hopes that they do not for the sake of Turkey and Iran. And for our sakes as well.