

Western Scholarship and the Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World

Mohamed Karbal

During the last two decades, the politics of certain Arab countries have been influenced by various Islamic groups. Some of these groups have expressed their dissatisfaction with the performances of their governments by using the available political channels to seek change; others have resorted to violence. Armed protests have taken the form of bombings, assassinations, and mass demonstrations.

Suicide attacks and armed struggle took place against Israeli, American, and French forces in Lebanon (1982-83). President Sadat of Egypt was assassinated in 1981 by Egyptian military personnel who were members of an Islamic movement. Another armed struggle against the Syrian regime was initiated by the Syrian Islamic Front in 1976-82. Numerous demonstrations against the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia took place during the 1980s.

Other Muslim groups attempted to participate in the decision-making process in their countries. The Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt encouraged its prominent members to run for election to the Egyptian Parliament. However, the Society was not considered a legal party according to Egyptian law. The Wafd, a legitimate party, allowed the Society of Muslim Brothers to campaign under their banner. As a result, members of the Society voted in accordance with their ideological and political beliefs rather than the Wafd party line. In Jordan, the Society of Muslim Brothers campaigned as an independent party during the 1988 elections and won twenty percent of the seats.

Due to the Arab countries' economic and strategic importance, various governments, scholars, and private and public organizations have paid close attention to these incidents. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, academic conventions have been held, books and articles have been published, and grants have been awarded for research. Western and Arab scholars have described it with such labels as Islamic fundamentalism, revivalism, awakening, reformism, resurgence, renewal, militancy, or simply

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a return to Islam. But most Muslims use the Arabic term *al ṣaḥwah al Islāmīyah*, which means the Islamic awakening. Whatever the label, Islamic movements are trying to change the social, economic, and political structures of those countries.

This paper will examine important works on the recent Islamic resurgence in the Arab world. Most of these works that have tried to trace the causes of Islamic resurgence during the last three decades have been biased. However, the main goal of this paper is to analyze critically several of these works in order to point to the real causes of the contemporary Islamic resurgence in the Arab world. Numerous causes for the Islamic resurgence, ones that any scholar should bear in mind before reaching any conclusion(s) on this phenomenon, will also be suggested.

Western Views of the Islamic Resurgence

Western scholars have used various approaches to explain the recent Islamic resurgence in the Arab world. Some have followed the behaviorist approach by writing descriptive works on the social base of Islamic movements, its social strata, recruitment methods, and organization. Some have tried to trace this phenomenon's causes by using the developmentalist approach. They concluded that modernization and development from traditional to modern societies have caused Muslims to resort to a formal return to Islam and its "traditional" nature.

One of the earliest reference books for Western Middle East scholars is Manfred Halpern's *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*. His work attempts to predict the future of politics in the Middle East by analyzing its social groups and institutions. An entire chapter, "Neo-Islamic Totalitarianism," focuses on Islamic movements, which he considers one of several backward-looking manifestations of the social and psychological frustrations facing modernization in the Middle East.

Halpern dwells in detail on the Islamic opposition movements, particularly the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt. In a manner that is questionable from an academic point of view, Halpern describes the nature of the Islamic movement by stating that:

The neo-Islamic totalitarian movements are essentially fascist movements. They concentrate on mobilizing passion and violence to enlarge the power of their charismatic leader and the solidarity of the movement. They view material progress primarily as means for accumulating strength for political expansion, and entirely deny individual and social freedom. They champion the values and emotions of a heroic past, but repress all free critical analysis of their past roots or present problems.¹

¹M. Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 135-6.

It appears that Halpern has accused the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt of being "fascist" and "totalitarian" without any objective examination of the Society's ideology. It also seems that the ten years he spent in the United States' State Department, as he mentions in his book, influenced him to think as a bureaucrat and in terms of what was "good for his country," rather than as an honest scholar. To the contrary, one would have thought that after all that government service, Halpern would have given us a fairer picture of the Islamic movements.

The Muslim Brothers were not national fanatics like the Fascists in Italy during the 1920s. In reality, they totally opposed the idea of Egyptian nationalism for which some Egyptians were calling during the beginning of the twentieth century. They also opposed the concept of Arab nationalism, if it did not lead to complete Islamic unity, on the grounds that such a concept was racist and therefore contrary to the Islamic principle of equality among all races.

Members of Islamic movements have always rejected the ideas that a movement leader should have absolute authority or be worshipped. Rather, a leader is subject to criticism if he does not take the advice and suggestion of his followers.

The Egyptian Muslim Brothers did not propagate a retrogressive ideology. They did not call for a return to the glories of the seventh century, but instead offered various suggestions that would help Muslims cope with the modern age and break the chains of tradition. The Muslim Brothers, in addition to other Islamic movements, believed that the Sharī'ah is general and flexible and that it only needed to be interpreted in light of present circumstances to make it relevant to present problems.²

During the 1960s, some Muslim writers thought that they had to compete with secular ideologies to gain public support. Thus they began to use terms not normally associated with Islamic political thought. The most familiar term was "socialism in Islam." Halpern could not resist comparing the Islamic "socialism" of the "neo-Islamic totalitarian" movements to the sixteenth-century German Anabaptists and the twentieth-century German National Socialists, better known as the Nazis.³

Halpern also discredits Islamic movements by considering their programs as a "mood" rather than a carefully planned resolution of specific problems. As it would be meaningless to rephrase his unique description of the tactics utilized by the Islamic movements, it is offered here in full:

Like fascism, neo-Islamic totalitarianism represents the institutionalization of struggle, tension, and violence. Unable to solve the basic public issues of modern life—intellectual and technolo-

²R. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 239.

³Halpern, *Politics of Social Change*, 143.

gical progress, the reconciliation of freedom and security, and peaceful relations among rival sovereignties—the movement is forced by its own logic and dynamics to pursue its vision through nihilistic terror, cunning, and passion. An efficient state administration is seen only as an additional powerful tool for controlling the community. The focus of power and the focus of devotion rest in the movement itself. Like fascist movements elsewhere, it is so organized as to make neo-Islamic totalitarianism the whole life of its members.⁴

Daniel Pipes, in a chapter entitled "Oil and Islamic Resurgence" in *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, asks: "What has influenced Muslims to turn increasingly to Islam as a political bond and a social ideal?" In reply, he uses Saudi and Libyan activities in the Arab world as bases for his analysis. He argues that their oil exports, more than anything else, have caused the recent Islamic resurgence. He also argues that Libya and Saudi Arabia have supplied financial aid to Islamic movements in the Arab world and concludes his study with the following statement:

So long as the price and consumption of oil remains high, they will continue to enjoy wealth and power; but when energy needs change, the oil-based wealth that fuels so much of the Islamic resurgence will decline. Current waves of Islamic activism will die along with the OPEC boom. More than any single factor, the oil market will determine how long the Islamic resurgence lasts.⁵

This was not the first time that Pipes had tied Islamic revivalism to the oil boom of the early 1970s. In 1980, he stated that "the oil boom marked a turning point in Muslim consciousness: more than anything else, it paved the way for widespread Islamic political activity."⁶

Now my question to Pipes is: Since the 1990s started with increases in the price of oil, higher even than those of the 1970s, does he expect Islamic activism to rise again? The Gulf War in the Middle East has proven that Pipes was mistaken in connecting the rise in oil prices to Islamic revivalism. Before the war ended, the price of oil increased to \$40 per barrel and it had no impact on Islamic resurgence as understood by Pipes.

Pipe's conclusion that the oil boom had great influence and caused an Islamic revival is illogical for two reasons. First, the oil revenues do

⁴Ibid., 140-1.

⁵D. Pipes, "Oil Wealth and Islamic Resurgence," in *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, ed. A. Dassouki (New York: Praeger, 1982), 51.

⁶D. Pipes, "This World Is Political; The Islamic Revival in the Seventies," *Orbis* 24 (1980): 20.

not go into the pockets of the leaders of the Islamic movements, but into government treasuries. Second, the decline in oil prices during the last few years did not affect the determination of Islamic movements to achieve their goals. In Egypt, for example, the Society of Muslim Brothers has participated in the parliamentary elections since 1985 and ranks second among political forces.

The important point missed by Pipes and others is that the contemporary Islamic resurgence was not born during the last few decades; it has existed since the message of Islam was delivered by the Prophet Muhammad. Those who call for a return to Islam may have differed in their approach to establishing an Islamic state, but all believe in the same final goal. Some have called for social change and the propagation of Islam as a method of changing society from the bottom up in the hope that this would lead to a change in the political system. Others, due to oppression by secular governments, have resorted to force.

Another interpretation that blames current economic crises for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is given in a chapter entitled "The So-called Renaissance of Islam" in *The Middle East: From Transition to Development*. In that article, Antoine Wessels claims that the so-called renaissance of Islam is nothing more than a product of the area's population explosion. According to him, this development has taken place mainly in the Third World due to high birth rates among Muslims. He continues to build his arguments by stating that most Muslims are illiterate and, as a result, they are easy prey for political and ideological manipulation.

Wessels concludes by insisting that during the recent revival, Islam has been used by political leaders for their political goals. He cites the Iranian revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini as an example. The problem with his analysis, however, as well as with those of many other scholars, is the method used to reach conclusions about Islamic revivalism. Wessels' approach is to analyze the actions of a group of individuals or of their leader, apparently not realizing that the behavior of an "Islamic" group or leader does necessarily reflect the true teachings of Islam.

A good example of the behaviorist approach is R. Hair Dekmejian's *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*. Started as a report for the American government, it attempts to trace the historical and theological anchors of Islamic fundamentalism. According to the author, it also deals with the social-psychological makeup of the individuals and the leadership of the fundamentalists.

In his effort to explain the ideology and practice of the fundamentalists, Dekmejian traces the ideas of the contemporary Islamic movement back to the Prophet Muhammad. However, he only deals with this issue in a very brief manner and, in addition, fails to treat the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence from a theoretical perspective. In other words, he does not examine the political ideas of Muslim thinkers thoroughly. Dekmejian ends his book with a list of ninety-one Islamic societies and describes their place of origin, beliefs and membership, militancy, sect, leadership, size, current status, and country of origin.

Richard Mitchell has produced an authoritative study of one Muslim group in his *The Society of Muslim Brothers*. In the first section, he gives a detailed history of the movement from its origins until 1954, when it was outlawed and its leaders were imprisoned by Nasser. The second section concentrates on the movement's organization, its methods of operation, its ideology and objectives, and the nature of its membership. In the description of the Society's ideology and organization, Mitchell is very careful and objective.

Unlike Mitchell, Nadav Safran has presented a less balanced view of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt. In *Egypt in Search of a Political Community*, he says that the Brothers "had no clear idea of the intricate problems of a modern state and a modern society."⁷

In general, Western scholars discuss the issues of modernization and political development in studying Islamic resurgence. Most of these development theorists view the revival of religion in politics as a regressive aspect hindering political development. In other words, secularism is and must continue to be the basic element for political development.

It has been reiterated by many scholars that the contemporary Islamic revival is a result of crises caused by modern challenges to Islam. They claim that modern times threaten the survival of Islam; therefore Muslims, in desperation, resort to religious revivalism. The works of Dekmejian are built on the hypothesis that Islamic revivalism is a product of crisis. In one article, he explains the reasons behind contemporary Islamic revivalism by stating that:

At the most general level of analysis, the recent quest for a return to the Islamic ethos appears to be a natural response to the successive pathological experiences which have buffeted Islamic societies in contemporary times. This protracted crisis milieu included the disorienting political, economic, and social impact of Western and Soviet imperialism.⁸

I agree with the assumption that Muslim societies have gone through various changes and are presently facing different and new ideas due to modernization and contact with the West. Also, I would suggest the argument that Muslims are not faced with a crisis, but rather with a challenge that can be met successfully. John Esposito argues that Islamic revivalism should not be examined by scholars as an issue of conflict between Muslim traditionalists and reformists, for, "the compatibility of Islam and modernity itself is not the issue . . . [What is debated is] the direction,

⁷N. Safran, *Egypt in Search of a Political Community: An Analysis of the Intellectual and Political Evolution in Egypt, 1804-1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 231.

⁸R. H. Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 3.

method, and degree of change required."⁹ This view gives Islamic revivalism more credit than the perspective that sees it as a result of a "crisis."

In conclusion, the various approaches used to study the Islamic resurgence of the last three decades prove that Islamic political thought has been treated, in general, as a passing political phenomenon dependent on specific social, economic, and political incidents. There is no significant difference among scholars. Most of them, it seems, insist on continuing the old approach used to study the Muslim world: orientalism.

Orientalism and Scholars of the Middle East

Orientalism, or the method of scholarship used in the study of the Arab and Islamic worlds of the Middle East and practiced mainly by British and French specialists during the colonial era, gradually came under severe attack from both Muslim and Christian Arabs as well as non-Arab Muslims. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, criticized the major works of leading Western and Arab social scientists who specialized in Arab and Islamic studies: Hamilton A. R. Gibb, Bernard Lewis, P. J. Vatikiotis, S. Hamady, Maxime Rodinson and others. Said insists that the study of the East, specifically the Islamic Orient, which reflects the official colonialist policies of Britain, France, and the United States, was a product of certain institutions and social and religious customs. He states:

The work of predecessors, the institutional life of a scholarly field, the collective nature of any learned enterprise: these, to say nothing of economic and social circumstances, tend to diminish the effects of the individual scholar's production. A field like Orientalism has a cumulative and corporate identity, one particularly strong given its associations with traditional learning (the classics, the Bible, philology), public institutions (governments, trading companies, geographical societies, universities) and generically determined writing (travel books, books of exploration, fantasy, exotic description). The result of Orientalism has been a sort of consensus: certain things, certain types of statements, certain types of work have seemed for the Orientalist correct. He has built his work and research upon them, and they in turn have pressed hard upon new writers and scholars [T]he Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways.¹⁰

Said argues that the West's domination of the Islamic world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an important factor in the

⁹J. L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 16.

¹⁰E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 202.

formation and refinement of the orientalist's assumptions, language, and conclusions. The view that their scholarship embodies an intellectually inadequate approach has come to be held by a number of Western academics, such as Leonard Binder.¹¹

Maryam Jameelah, a Muslim of American origin, examined the writings of Western scholars on Islam—Philip Hitti, Kenneth Cragg, S. D. Goitein, Montgomery Watt, Wilfred C. Smith, Nadav Safran, Hamilton A. R. Gibb, and Freeland Abbott—and published her findings in *Islam and Orientalism*. According to her, these scholars represented various topics ranging from history to modernization. She concluded her work by summarizing the orientalist's views of Islam:

The theme of all their writings is that Islam must be abandoned on the premise that anything revealed fourteen centuries ago is necessarily obsolete and irrelevant for the technological civilization of today. With their rejection of transcendental values, "change" is upheld as the supreme good and anything old must be discarded as useless if mankind is to "progress."¹²

The writer would like to stress, however, that not all Western social scientists have been biased in their studies of other cultures. One of the most objective and logical scholars of Islamic studies is Erwin I. J. Rosenthal. He believes that the crisis of contemporary Muslims is ideological in nature: the Islamists were humiliated and defeated by the secular nationalists. Therefore, in his *Islam in the Modern National State*, he cautions Western scholars to be careful in their analysis of Islamic issues:

It is not for us [Western scholars] to prescribe the remedy. In their scholarly quest for truth, western students of contemporary Islam can easily be mistaken for "neo-colonialists," especially if they usurp the role of critic and judge. We must try to find the internal and external causes of an existing situation.¹³

A researcher has to be neutral in his/her approach to any field of study. One might be attracted to a certain topic, as this is how research begins, but he/she should not be influenced by his/her sympathy towards one group or another. A scholar, especially from a foreign culture, may introduce certain "facts" or assumptions that are not reliable in order to prove a certain hypothesis. In other words, individual prejudice, which

¹¹L. Binder, *The Ideological Revolution in the Middle East* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), 136.

¹²M. Jameelah, *Islam and Orientalism* (Lahore: Mohammad Yousuf Khan and Sons, 1981), 182.

¹³E. Rosenthal, *Islam in the Modern National State* (London: Penguin, 1970), xii.

might be a result of the researcher's own ignorance, may lead to the publication or the spread of information that would become "knowledge" for others but is, in reality, a misrepresentation of the true facts.

In general, the literature on the Islamic resurgence has been criticized for being biased and ethnocentric. Herman Eilts, in the foreword to Esposito's *Islam and Politics*, has summarized the nature of academic inquiry into this topic:

In the West, confusion over the meaning of this phenomenon [Islamic resurgence] was compounded by ethnocentricity, prejudice, and, interestingly enough, the limitation of our modern political science technical lexicon to describe, accurately and nuancially, the dynamics of what was taking place in other cultural settings. Developments tended to be construed in Western rather than Islamic terms, often resulting in conceptual skewing.¹⁴

This statement clearly explains the prejudiced nature that has dominated the writings of some prominent Western social scientists in their approaches to foreign cultures.

Causes of Resurgence

Unfortunately the violence of various groups, not the political ideas of Islam, has caught the attention of Western scholars. Most of them have failed to elaborate genuine causes for Islamic resurgence. Therefore, this paper will propose general suggestions to help us understand the roots of the Islamic resurgence and why some Muslims have resorted to violence.

A major reason for the Islamic resurgence during the 1980s was the lack of political freedom in the Arab world. The ideological conflict between Arab secularists and Islamists has added to this phenomenon. Arab nationalists gave Islam no political role. After independence, the governments of the new Arab nation-states were run by nationalists. As a result, conflicts between the Islamists and the nationalists began to emerge. The Islamists essentially demanded the application of Islamic laws and principles, while the nationalists insisted upon secularism.

Once in power, the nationalists applied new systems of laws and governments. European constitutional, commercial, and criminal laws were translated literally into Arabic. Almost every Arab country adopted the laws of its ex-colonial power. Libya, for example, translated Italian criminal law and applied it as if it were Libyan law, despite the fact that some articles of the new law were not phrased in accordance with Libyan custom and traditions shaped by the Shari'ah. Thus many Arabs, despite the degree of their religious beliefs, found themselves opposing such laws not on religious grounds, but because of the violation of custom.

¹⁴J. L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, ix.

The application of Western laws in Arab countries can be traced to the efforts of secular-minded intellectuals, many of whom were educated in the West or in Western-oriented schools in Arab countries. They believed that the West set the best example for those who desire economic development. Calls for establishing political institutions similar to those in the West represented a major postindependence policy. Nationalism, socialism, communism, and the separation between religion and politics dominated the minds of these nationalist intellectuals.

Arab intellectuals followed different ideologies and visions of future Arab political, social, and economic life. The disagreement between nationalists and Islamists evolved from a mere debate in the pages of books and newspapers into a bloody struggle that cost the Islamists dearly. This was one result of the seizure of power in the Arab countries by military regimes and royal families. The presence of Israel also justified the Arab leaders' calls for Arab unity in the defense of Arab nationalism.

On the other hand, Islamists did not support Arab nationalism, for the end result would not be Muslim unity. Due to their opposition, many were imprisoned and tortured. After long years of imprisonment, most Islamists rejected any type of government based on non-Islamic laws and urged Muslims to establish Islamic states. Some justified the use of force to overthrow non-Islamic governments ruling Muslim peoples. Any effort to understand the Islamic resurgence should be based on the examination of the ideological conflict between Arab Islamists and secularists.

As we enter the 1990s, so-called "Muslimphobia"¹⁵ has spread to Western politicians. Western attitudes towards the Muslim world will be more hostile and may lead to dangerous consequences. Since the fall of communism in 1989, some Western politicians have created a new enemy: Muslims. This was one of the main points of an interview with Italian Foreign Minister Gianni De Michele, the president of the European Community in 1990. When asked to comment on the need to keep NATO intact in the absence of a threat from the East after the collapse of communism, he replied:

It would be a mistake to dissolve this asset (NATO), to waste the cohesion that has been built within this security organization . . . and you can imagine that the confrontation between communism and the market economies could be replaced by a confrontation between the Western and Islamic worlds.¹⁶

NATO's and the European Community's tolerance of the ongoing genocide of the Bosnian Muslims by the Serbian Christians is a current

¹⁵A term used by Daniel Pipes in his article "The Muslims Are Coming! The Muslims Are Coming!," *National Review* (19 November 1990): 28.

¹⁶See *Newsweek: The International Newsmagazine* (2 July 1990): 56.

example of the fear of Muslims not only by scholars but politicians and their governments.

In summary, the Western approach to the Islamic resurgence in the Arab world has tended to be narrow and influenced by the interest of the scholar conducting the research. For example, if a scholar or writer is interested in the field of psychology, the resulting study will state that members of Islamic movements have an identity crisis in this modern world. This psychological problem leads such people to resort to the teachings of Islam in order to find their identity and feel secure again.

An economist always raises the issue of modernization and how Muslims, being "traditionalists," reject these aspects of development. But in fact, Islamists have never rejected technology or development. They may have rejected Western behavior that conflicts with Islamic teaching, but this is not unique to Muslims: the Chinese and other Far Eastern societies have also rejected some Western ways of behavior that were in conflict with their beliefs. An objective study of Islamic movements would show that their leaders are the most educated people in their societies. They are engineers, social scientists, and medical doctors.

None of these approaches can explain the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in a fair context. No single approach alone, the psychological for instance, may contribute to our understanding of such a complicated issue. As a result of the very complexity of the whole issue, a deeper and more accurate understanding can only be obtained by an approach that is intentionally comprehensive and objective. In other words, a researcher has to break away from the shadow of prejudice against foreign social happenings, for only by dispelling these shadows will he/she be able to open the door to an accurate understanding of emerging developments in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

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