

## Wanted

A Change in Paradigms on the Middle East -  
A View of Political and Religious Trends

By Dr. Azza Karam

Research Paper



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A View of Political and Religious Trends

**By Dr. Azza Karam**

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The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author, and are not intended in any way, to represent those of any organisation, institution, group or individual.

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## Contents

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Introduction .....	5
ACT I - An Economic Bird's Eye View .....	6
Some Population Reality Checks.....	7
Enter Islamism onto the global political scape... ..	7
ACT II – Political Landscapes:The Continuum of Political Islam .....	10
The Fondest Appeal of Islamism.....	14
Common Political Platforms and Distinctive Positions .....	16
On the Israeli-Palestinian Dynamics .....	16
On democracy and human rights .....	17
On women .....	18
ACT III - Blowback and Regional and International Implications of Islamist Ascendancy to Power .....	21
ACT IV - Can Moderate Islamists be Strategic Allies? .....	24
ACT V - Seizing the 'Yes We Can' moment.....	27
Bibliography .....	29



## Introduction

### **WANTED** **A Change in Paradigms on the Middle East -** **A View of Political and Religious Trends<sup>1</sup>**

*"We are witnessing the collapse of the American Empire...What's going on in America is a result of the violation of the rights of people in Palestine, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Muslims around the world" (Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas Leader)<sup>2</sup>*

*"You have that right [to take a rightful place in the community of nations] but it comes with real responsibilities and that place cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilisation." (Barack Obama, President of the USA)<sup>3</sup>*

The above two quotes frame the arguments in this article: changing political realities which both inspire and shape relationships between the Middle East and North Africa and the Western world (particularly the USA); and the incumbent need to change perspectives and approaches.

Conceived of as a series of 'acts', we begin with the economic and political background. The second act will describe what I term as the Islamist Continuum. I will argue that Islamist movements fall on a spectrum characterised by a nominal unity of purpose (i.e. a more just/Islamic governance), but a significant difference in methods. Then I depict how it is that Islamist movements are given an unparalleled boost both because of the decline of secular movements and "blowback" from US foreign policy – the latter seen as being realised and endorsed by both the European Union and Arab governments. But in this act too, I discuss how it is that religion is not only an occurrence in the Muslim world, but part and parcel of an ideological echo on both Eastern and Western hemispheres. In the final acts, I will conclude by arguing that certain Islamist tendencies should not be seen as enemies, but rather as potentially powerful allies in an emerging 'birthing' of new discourses.

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(1) The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author, and are not intended in any way, to represent those of any organisation, institution, group or individual.

(2) Associated Press quoted Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh, on the financial meltdown, as saying in the Gaza Strip on <http://www.islamonline.com/news/newsfull.php?newid=170563> (November 10, 2008).

(3) Quoted from US President Barack Obama's speech to the Iranians on the occasion of their New Year (Nawruz). Financial Times, March 21, 2009.

## ACT I - An Economic Bird's Eye View<sup>4</sup>

Buoyed by sharply rising oil prices in 2008, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) experienced high economic growth. In fact, from 2003-2008, GDP growth in MENA had exceeded 6.1 percent a year. On a per capita basis, MENA's 4.1 percent average growth since 2002 was more than double the region's per capita growth over the 1990s, and the strongest per capita growth performance for the region since the 1970s.

The region's growth advances had significant spill-over for job creation, one of the greatest development challenges facing the MENA region. MENA countries are at the absolute crest of a labor force growth surge, with labor force growth averaging 3.4 percent a year. Yet in the midst of this burgeoning labor force, unemployment, which stood at 14.3 percent of the labor force in 2000 fell to 10.8 percent by end of 2005. And most of the region's new jobs have come from the private sector, an important development for a region in which job creation, especially for an increasingly educated population, has become the litmus test for economic performance.

This economic performance in MENA is actually more nuanced than suggested by regional indicators, and needs to be put in context. Despite higher economic growth for the MENA region, in the context of developing world growth averaging 7.1 percent a year since 2002, the MENA region – despite being the major source of a commodity exhibiting record price advances – has been substantially outperformed.

Moreover, the upturn in regional growth since the oil boom has not been evenly shared: resource-poor countries have not experienced significant spillovers from the oil boom, with any chances of transfer to resource poor countries largely undermined by negative developments on the external and fiscal fronts (e.g. higher oil import bills and energy subsidies).

Notwithstanding continued growth and reform performance, rising food prices represent a growing poverty vulnerability risk for the MENA region with deep clustering of large proportions of the population around the poverty line: while less than 2 percent of MENA's population lives on less than \$1 a day, some 20 percent of the regional population lives on less than \$2 a day (the respective figures are 3 percent and 43 percent for Egypt and 10 percent and 45 percent for Yemen). The rising global food prices, representing a serious risk to wider-scale

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(4) Sources: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/0,menuPK:247606~pagePK:146732~piPK:146828~theSitePK:256299,00.html> (April 1, 2009); United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision (New York: 2005) <http://www.prb.org/pdf07/YouthinMENA.pdf> (April 1, 2009).

poverty in MENA, is further exacerbated by poor 'safety nets' (lack of health care, dependency on food subsidies for basic staples, rising education costs, etc.).

Latest developments in the global economic environment call for some caution. The global financial (and other) markets have entered a phase of heightened uncertainty – to put it mildly. Although the MENA region has been relatively modestly affected to date, the global recession is expected to steadily impact the MENA region, through a tightening of credit and other channels, in the coming months and years. As we are seeing in the case of the halting construction in, and the emptying national coffers of, Dubai for instance.

### **Some Population Reality Checks**

The region's growth rate reached a peak of 3 percent a year around 1980. Currently, the population of MENA is growing at about 2 percent a year, still higher than the world average. The average MENA population is estimated at around (+/-) 300 million. Out of this, just over a third of the total population of MENA is composed of youth (UN definition ranges from 15-25 years of age). In other words, at nearly 100 million today, this number is unprecedented, and renders the Arab region effectively 'the youngest in the world'. According to some estimates however, the overall share of youth in MENA's population is expected to decline to 17 percent by 2025.

### **Enter Islamism onto the global political scape...**

Ten to twenty years ago, the confluence of religion and mainstream political activism was deemed by many scholars and politicians to be, at best, a 'lack of awareness of secular realities'. Today, religion and politics are the topics of many graduate courses in almost all universities, and they appear in the headlines of major books and publications. Religion and politics, the sacred and the political, and several other variations of the same theme, are definitely 'in'.<sup>5</sup>

This trend is for good reason. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union came a near eclipse of the grand political meta-narratives of communism and socialism. Virtually left alone as the victor, Liberalism eventually became entangled with globalisation. But globalisation itself is littered with hypocritical and morally corrupt political regimes, serious global economic disparities, global

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(5) See especially Richard L. Rubenstein (ed.), *Spirit Matters: The Worldwide Impact of Religion on Contemporary Politics* (New York: 1987); Gustavo Benavides and Martin W. Daly (eds.), *Religion and Political Power* (Albany, NY, 1989); Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Michigan and Washington DC, 1999); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, 2004).

warming and debilitating effects on the environment, armed civil conflicts, and with transnational acts of terrorism as icing on the cake. Ringing in the collective global ears are the mantras of charismatic religious personas and the ethos of religious-political parties working simultaneously, it would seem, on the mind (providing new mobilising ideologies), and the body (serving many people's economic welfare in the form of education, health services and even pension plans in some countries).

Whether it is the Christian Coalition of the US playing a strong role in the election and governance decisions of the Bush Administration, the Hindu BJP Party in India ruling for many years and now in opposition, or the ongoing influence of Iranian religious clerics in the political decision-making, the fact is, religion and politics are today's most well-known bed fellows.

When Islamism, or political Islam, as we know it today, emerged strongly in the 1980s in the Arab world, it grabbed Western headlines with events such as the assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, various kidnappings, bombings, and armed conflict in Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria, to name but a few. Almost since the 1980s then, political Islam was perceived in the Western public consciousness as synonymous with violence. This impression has almost solidified in Western collective consciousness by unfolding events in the Arab world together with ongoing bombings and attacks elsewhere (i.e. the Paris subway bombings, US Embassy attacks in Nairobi and Dar El Salam, World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, followed by Bali, Madrid, London, Glasgow, and so on).

In spite of major attempts to eliminate them, the Taliban have re-emerged with a vengeance in Afghanistan. Some political actors and security advisors in and out of the country even argue that it is necessary to engage them in the political process.

Hizbullah is seen in many circles – in and out of Lebanon – as the moral, political and military victors over Israel since their 2006 conflict. Hamas won legislative elections and, after international attempts to isolate them, staged a coup of sorts which leaves them now reigning over the Gaza Strip.

For the first time, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has 80 seats in a parliament of over 400 seats, and is arguably slated to win free and fair elections in the country – if they were to be held. Algeria's 'North African Al-Qaeda' is repeatedly vying for gruesome limelight through violent messages and terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden is supposedly rooted in Waziristan, along the Afghan border, but 'cells' operate throughout Europe.

'Home grown terrorism' is now as popular in academic and policy think-tank discussions as 'democracy' was in the 1990s. Controversial cartoons and films about Muslims and Islam, and reactions to them, feature on global news and in nightly television talk shows.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 created shockwaves in political circles around the western world, the ripples of which can still be felt in speeches made by the current President Ahmedinejad, and in the ongoing debates about the country's nuclear capacity.

A legislative decision held that the government's revoking the ban on the veil in Turkey was illegitimate. This decision almost decided the future of the country's government and governing party despite strong electoral success in August of 2007. In a country struggling to hang onto its staunchly secular identity these Islamic forces in government are causing considerable consternation amongst many circles.

The conflict between Hamas and Fateh, as it unfolded in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), has done nothing to enhance both the impression of terror and the fear of it.

Today, spokespersons of political Islam, or Islamism, find themselves at best, on the defensive about their diversity and their aspirations, and at worst, cornered and fighting.<sup>6</sup> This is a dangerous state of affairs; it is problematic to have a popular political movement misunderstood and pushed into a corner at any time. It is also unwise to subsume a diverse political movement under one heading, such as (terrorism/terrorists) which dismisses, in one fell stroke, its varied protagonists from opportunities for representation and negotiation at any time. But it is dangerous to do all of this at a time when many within, and even outside, of these movements feel they have legitimate grievances, and believe they are fighting for a just cause. It is also a downright waste when some members of these movements are potentially critical interlocutors, at a moment when all of us are seeking a socio-political meta-narrative that can inspire and move us forward in contemporary times.

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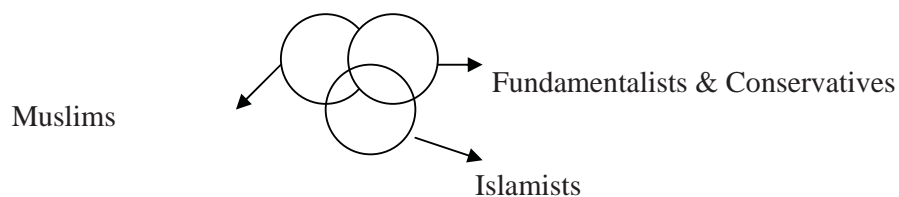
(6) Or 'resisting' as some, like Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh (the Prime Minister in the former Palestinian ruling coalition), would have it.

## ACT II – Political Landscapes: The Continuum of Political Islam

*'The Prophet is our Leader, Islam is our credo (ideology), and the Holy Qur'an is our Constitution'.<sup>7</sup>*

Islamism is only one stream of politics within and outside the Muslim world. It is but a fraction of the different forms of social and political mobilization that take place among Muslims in general – and certainly amongst Muslim communities in the western hemisphere.<sup>8</sup>

Various Western authors continue to analyse political Islam, and after the US invasion of Iraq, several have attempted to trace differences between Shia`a and Sunni trends. Often, terms such as Islamic fundamentalism, salafi, jihadi, and Islamic radicalism, have been used to explain the roots and objectives of all of these movements. Much debate took place, particularly in the late 1980s and 90s, about appropriate nomenclature. For the context of this study, the term Islamism is considered more appropriate to describe a continuum of movements which have a quintessentially political agenda, revolving around Islamising (rendering more Islamic, often with the implementation of Shari`a laws) the structures of governance and those of the overall society. It must also be stated at the outset that, as a political movement with an agenda of eventually ruling, or capturing power, the distinction between Sunni or Shi`a origins, or such affiliations, may simply cause more confusion.



*Figure 1: Muslim Scapes: Intersecting and Distinct Realities*

An Islamist is to be distinguished (see figure 1 above) from her/his fundamentalist and conservative counterpart, in that s/he is not literal in their interpretations and understanding of text, and in fact, can be quite creative in the manner in which they implement their 'religious' understanding. Islamists are invariably heavily engaged in public social work and invest in it.

(7) An old motto of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood which became prominent in the 1980s.

(8) For more on the transnational connections between Islamist ideology in Muslim countries and Europe and the US, see Azza Karam (ed.), *Transnational Political Islam: Religion, Ideology and Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

Whereas a fundamentalist may or may not become engaged in political thought, debate and activism, an Islamist, per definition, does. **Political engagement is a sine qua non of being an Islamist.** The latter distinction also clarifies the difference between an Islamist, a Muslim fundamentalist and an average Muslim. In other words, it is the involvement in a movement or a group that is advocating or struggling for political change – specifically to render more ‘Islamic’ **the social and political** governing principles (or government) - that is the principal hallmark of an Islamist.

For many Islamists, Islamisation as a political agenda, **is a means to bring about justice** – politically, economically and socially. To be an Islamist, it is by no means enough to be a Muslim, nor is it even sufficient (or even necessary) to be a fundamentalist. Rather, an Islamist must be committed to active public engagement in the quest for a more Islamic (read: just) society. All Islamists will share this ultimate aim.<sup>9</sup>

But what constitutes an ‘Islamic’ (or just) society, and therefore, Islamic governance? And what methods should be used to achieve this aim? These are amongst the most important questions around which Islamists will differ (often radically and as we see in present day Afghanistan and Iraq, often violently) from each other. There is no homogenous Islamist entity. It is by now almost a cliché to say that not all Islamists are alike, and that there is a serious misrepresentation when they are all lumped as either ‘fundamentalists’, ‘fanatics’, or ‘terrorists’. The latter obscures the significant differences within Islamist political thought and praxis.

When conceiving of Islamist movements, it is important to consider a continuum - which in itself is a constantly changing kaleidoscope. The Islamist continuum falls within a broader political one (see Figure 2). In other words, if we think of the political field as represented by a broad and ever changing continuum of ideologies and/or movements, then we can distinguish between those of the extreme left, of the extreme right, and plenty who fall in between. On the right wing of this political spectrum are nationalist and religious-based parties (themselves very diverse).



Figure 2: Political Scapes: The Political Continuum

(9) Which partly explains why the (relatively new compared to others) Egyptian Islamist party al-Wasat, boasted a couple of Christians as members.

If we were to take this right end of the political spectrum, where Islamists (and other faith-based and nationalist political parties) can be located, we would note that this ideology itself merits its own spectrum, or continuum (i.e. in figure 2, if the broader political continuum goes from A to C, then the Islamist one falls from B to C). On the left end of the continuum, is the 'moderate' tendency, while on the opposite side of it, the right, lie more radical/extremist/militant tendencies. Clearly, these are generalized and relative political categories (the moderate can only be described as such when juxtaposed with the extremist and vice-versa). Where the different groups and organizations fall on the continuum and how they should be named (as moderate or radical) is a matter of great debate, not only amongst those outside of the movements, but also within them.

Moderate Islamists<sup>10</sup> maintain that change will come about only through long-term education, social and economic engagement, constituency building and advocacy, whereby increasing numbers of people become 'followers' and eventually espouse the political ideology cum social action package. Moderates will generally advocate for and participate in elections, and in several majority Muslim countries and societies where this is permitted,<sup>11</sup> they will register as political parties and organize themselves as such. One notable and critical difference between Islamist parties and other political entities is that the moderate Islamists tend to have relatively well-defined social agenda(s) often exemplified by their provision of important social services (e.g. schools and clinics) in their respective communities. The latter lends them credibility and support among the various social classes (particularly the larger poorer ones) and thus constitutes an important factor in their political outreach and popularity.

The continuum is not etched in stone, but is fluid. Moderate Islamists, for instance, are themselves very diverse in terms of their aims and agendas, as well as the modality of their organization. It may happen that one moderate party, at certain times during its interaction and existence, or on specific issues, adopts a stance that sits more at the 'radical' end of the continuum. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood for example, remained relatively silent during a spate of attacks against foreign tourists in Egypt carried out by radical Islamists in the early 1990s. Some sectors of the Algerian FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) were radicalized into violence after the Algerian elections (which they were set to win) were cancelled by the intervention of the army in the early 1990s. Also to this day, in spite of its evolution into mainstream political participation methods, Hamas's official documentation notes that the state of Israel must be eradicated.

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(10) An example of a moderate Islamist party in the Muslim world is the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, which came into existence in 1928 in Egypt), and which has branched in different countries since, and is very diverse in its structure and organizational method(s). Today's Hamas in Palestine is a descendant and branch of the Brotherhood.

(11) Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Algeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, to name but a few.

Alternatively, some radical Islamists may veer towards the moderate end of the continuum on specific issues or during certain times. An example of this is the Lebanese Hizbullah, which has a history of anti-Israeli struggle and became particularly notorious during the 1980s for the kidnapping of Westerners in Beirut. In the 1990s, Hizbullah formed itself into a legitimately recognized political party, ran for elections and won seats in the Lebanese parliament. Their decision to participate in electoral politics was certainly based on real politik,<sup>12</sup> but it was also a choice for a relatively moderate strategy – selectively applied. Such a shift has implications for whether or not (and how) shari`a<sup>13</sup> should be applied. It is worthwhile mentioning in this context for instance, a letter sent in 2007 shortly after the electoral success of Hamas, by its appointed foreign minister to the UN Secretary General. The letter noted a willingness to accept negotiations with the Israeli state (and its existence), a far cry from earlier positions maintained throughout by this party. Although the contents of this communication were denied once it was made public, the letter, with what was noted therein, stands.

Similarly, Egyptian Jihad announced a change in its policies with the renunciation of violence as a means to their envisioned end of an Islamic state. This renunciation began to take shape after the massacre of tourists in Luxor, Egypt, in 1995 and the ensuing anger on the part of many Egyptians (many of whom depend on the industry for their livelihoods and were thus adversely affected by the significant drop in revenues). Jihad's announcement in 2004, and the Hamas call for a ceasefire against Israel (which took place some time before the Palestinian legislative elections) were both treated scathingly by Al-Qaeda's spokesman, Ayman al-Zawahri.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, by so doing, both Egyptian Jihad and Palestinian Hamas were effectively shifting on some issues at strategic moments towards the more moderate end of the Islamist political continuum.

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(12) It is maintained that the longevity of Hizbullah's claim to legitimacy is dependent on the dialectic with Israel. Needless to say, with the Lebanese-Israeli events of August 2006, the legitimacy of Hizbullah will not only cease to be an issue, but it has effectively become an icon to (reinstated) Arab pride after the humiliation of the 1967 war.

(13) Commonly translated as Islamic law, it is worth noting that *shari`a* is not one body of text or interpretation, but rather the sum of various juridical interpretations collated over a certain course of time. Thus, there is no one *shari`a* law, but a whole set of man-made laws – some of which may differ according to the specific school of interpretation followed. This would also partly explain why certain applications of *shari`a* differ from one Muslim country to another.

(14) For more details on Al-Qaeda's position on justice and violence, see also Karam, 2004, and Rohan Gunaratne's *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003).

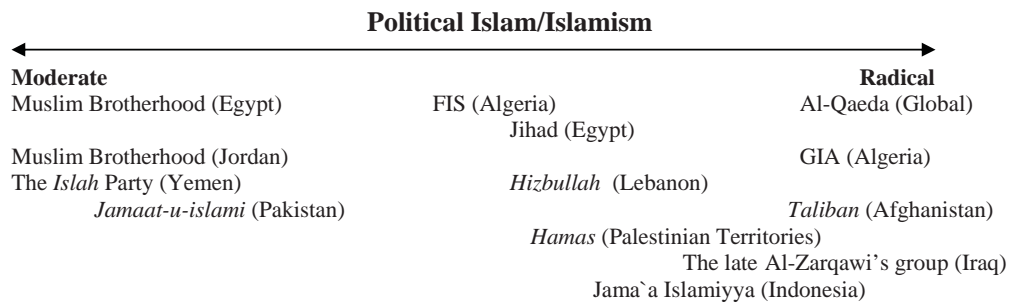


Figure 3: Islamist Scapes: The Islamist Continuum

Whereas moderate Islamists stress that change will come about gradually, peacefully and with mass support, and indeed largely urge the full participation in political processes, radical Islamists tend to be more Machiavellian in so far as they see violence as a (legitimate) means to an end. Although they may sometimes justify it as a form of self-defense, radical Islamists (e.g. the late al-Zarqawi's group and like-minded brethren in Iraq) will generally maintain that violence is both retaliatory (and even pre-emptive) of more violence and aggression to come. This is evidenced by Bin Laden's insinuation in 2001 that by targeting the unjust power (thalim) of the US and other Western nations, what is taking place is a retaliation against Western actions, a 'triumph by the injured' so to speak, and a pre-emption of future injustices. Once again, we are hearing an echo of Islamist discourse in that of the current US Administration (as well as of that of the Israeli leadership). The above radical Islamist protagonists all iterate a similar rhetoric: in the pursuit of their vision of 'justice' and for the sake of 'self-defense', violence is legitimate.

### The Fondest Appeal of Islamism

What lies at the heart of the appeal of such groups, irrespective of where they are on the continuum at any given moment in time? There is nothing new in claims for and political manifestos about social, political and economic justice. Marxist and socialist parties of various hues have had these claims for decades. Nevertheless, the claim to populist legitimacy which Islamism has, should not be underestimated at a time when the shifting global topography has created enabling local-regional conditions.

Historically, economic globalisation has entailed experimentation with structural adjustment policies which left governments of developing countries crippled as far as providing the basic economic needs of their populace, while multi-national corporations moved in to control ever increasing shares of national resources. At the same time, privatisation and free trade tariffs resulted in local markets becoming increasingly flooded with foreign produce and locals found difficult to

compete. Collectively, these policies resulted in a shrinking formal job market on the one hand, and the enlargement of an informal sector with little protection and fewer rights for workers on the other. In the Arab context in particular, the phenomenon of rentier economies (depending largely on oil in the Gulf countries and tourism in others) has further complicated the process of sustainable economic development. Recent developments in the world economy however, positioned a few Gulf countries in a relatively stronger financial position, fuelling opportunities for significant cultural and political developments – some of which may be jeopardized by the current economic downturn.

At the same time, grand political meta-narratives (of Maoism, Leninism, Marxism, Capitalism and Liberalism), all appeared to fail the expectations of achieving minimal utopias for the average Mohammed, Juan, or 'Joe the Plumber'. Where Islamists can claim a leading edge is precisely in the fact that they combined the allure of a grand political narrative (Islam), with a workable economic agenda.

Who provided affordable clothes, books, medicine and even transportation for the least privileged university students in Cairo in the 1970s? The Muslim Brotherhood. Who provides affordable (if not free) healthcare and pensions for families that have lost breadwinners in Lebanon? Hizbullah. Who organised pension schemes, arranged for alternative schooling in times of school closures, and ran an infrastructural network of services in the face of increasing corruption of a ruling party in the West Bank and Gaza? Hamas. Where is it possible to meet the religious needs, with political mobilisation and economic efficacy (including both efficiently providing much needed charity and receiving it in a face-saving manner)? At the home of the Islamists. In many ways, Islamism seems to function as a one-stop shop for both politics and social services.

Furthermore, we are living in the age of crisis for secularism and secular values. For too long in the Arab and non-Arab Muslim worlds, secularism was the domain of the elite, many of whom were either part of the ruling clans, or the few in opposition to them but who nevertheless emulated them in life-style and appearance. Whether rightly or wrongly, secularism is seen by the majority as synonymous with 'liberalism', 'western values', and the 'non-religious'. In short, secularism is perceived as the domain of the rich, the few, the old, and the rulers, or, the corrupt. As such, it holds increasingly less sway among a majority hungry for change, fed up with rhetoric that delivers to a few at the expense of the many, with conditions that oppress in the name of democratisation and liberalisation, and believing that they have an untried solution sanctioned by the highest power on earth – God.

All this is taking place at a time when largely illegitimate regimes continue to be seen to be supported, or propped up, by the United States with European allies.

With all of the above features, it is not difficult to appreciate where and why Islamists host a strong appeal. This appeal has, if anything, increased and intensified by the unfolding events in the Arab and Muslim world.

### **Common Political Platforms and Distinctive Positions**

There are some common political platforms between Islamists and other secular liberal parties in the Muslim world at large. These two groups share general concerns around poverty and globalisation, and a number of Islamists maintain key positions on democracy, human rights and in some instances, also on women's roles.

#### *On the Israeli-Palestinian Dynamics*

Almost all political parties in the Arab world are pro-Palestinian emotively and intellectually. **Regardless of whether they are Muslim, Christian, or agnostic, all political parties (even those traditionally at odds with one another on other aspects) see Israel as an occupier of Palestinian land.**

Interestingly however, it is because the most vociferous supporters of Palestinians have been Islamists (dating back to the large contingent of Muslim Brotherhood members who fought alongside the Palestinians in 1948), that the issue of Palestine is seen and presented as an 'Islamic' issue - as though there are no Christian Palestinians. This distortion of reality has contributed to the widespread misinterpretation and evocation of the Arab-Israeli conflict as though it were a Muslim-Jewish one. This in turn feeds into current rhetoric employed by the various Israeli administrations that they are 'also' fighting the war against (Islamic) terrorists. In the words of one Syrian (Orthodox) scholar, Palestinian Christians are in double jeopardy - not only do they suffer as all Palestinians under occupation, but they do not even exist in their struggle.

Arab ruling parties that have signed peace treaties with Israel (and non-Arab political parties in Muslim countries) continue to maintain (quoting international law and various UN resolutions) that Israeli government presence in Gaza and the West Bank constitutes an occupation, and that Israel should agree to East Jerusalem as a capital of a Palestinian state.

Islamists, moderate and radicals alike, tend to disagree with their political counterparts on whether peace and normalization of relations with Israel is wise and/or necessary at all. Radical Islamists argue that Israel's mere presence and existence is in itself a constant act of aggression against Palestinians, and as such, should be resisted. The precise form that resistance should take (and what constitutes 'legitimate' armed struggle) is a matter of some discussion, debate, and as events in Iraq continue to unfold, of serious conflict between radical Islamists

themselves. However, during the two Palestinian Intifadas (uprisings), Islamists across the Muslim world have been arguably among the most vocal and active in their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. On suicide bombings, moderate Islamists have joined with their radical counterparts to counter relatively more mainstream Islamic voices,<sup>15</sup> by stating that as long as the targets were Israeli (and/or American) soldiers, the suicides were a legitimate form of struggle. Most radical Islamists however, maintain that the suicide bombings are a legitimate form of self-defence (or resistance) against continuous Israeli aggression, thus effectively not distinguishing between Israeli military and civilian populations.

### *On democracy and human rights*

Significantly, matters related to advocacy for democracy and human rights are also shared by Islamist and non-Islamist parties in many parts of the Muslim world. The exception are countries where Islamists are the ruling regimes and either fraught with internal dissension on how to implement an 'Islamic democracy' (e.g. Iran and Sudan), or not even willing to contemplate and/or engage publicly in such discussions on the topic (e.g. Saudi Arabia). Those opposed to Islamists heatedly maintain that Islamist espousal of democracy is opportunistic - as a means to achieving power themselves after which they will eliminate it. Such critics reference Khomeini and events prior to and after the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Sudanese episode with the Turabi regime, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the (brief) Islamist take-over in Somalia.

And yet, is it opportunism that has prompted several Islamist parties to 'reform' their organizational structures? For example the Islamist parties have advanced the political wing to lead the military/armed ones, they have developed an electoral platform as both Hizbullah and Hamas have done and contested elections. It is also opportunism that has prompted Islamist parties, as with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, to form strategic alliances with existing political parties, issue specific manifestoes outlining their positions vis-à-vis a woman's right to lead her community, and come up with public 'open letters' to their country's political leadership condemning endless political office and decrying the abuse of democracy - as with the Syrian and Saudi Arabian Islamists? To what extent can all this be dismissed as a ploy? And if so would these elaborate attempts at outlining their worldview and agendas not further underline the need to take these parties as serious political counterparts, rather than the current attempts which at best, alienate and marginalise, and at worst, render their members as martyrs and their ethos as the 'untried holy alternative'?

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(15) Such as the Mufti of Bosnia and the Sheikh of al-Azhar in Egypt, both of whom maintained that suicide is against Islam - even if the resistance to Israeli occupation is legitimate. See also Ergun Capan (ed.), *Terror and Suicide Attacks: An Islamic Perspective* (New Jersey, 2004).

As for championing human rights, anti-Islamists and liberals claim that the motivation behind arguing for these principles is that Islamists themselves are among the victims of human rights abuses that certain regimes perpetrate. Once in power, these critics maintain, Islamists will have no qualms about perpetuating the same abuses against their opposition. These sceptical voices can now also be heard across the Muslim world and outside of it. And yet, a closer look at the dynamics of Arab politics in particular, would point to a rather obvious feature: Islamist discourse only mirrors that of non-Islamist ruling parties - for where is there a transparent, accountable regime in power in the Arab region? In other words, the weaknesses and democratic deficit that characterises ruling regimes, are mirrored in their opposition too.

The Egyptian, Lebanese, Yemeni, Saudi and Moroccan regimes, to name but a few, have gone through a retraction of promises on democracy that followed closely on the heels of the Coalition forces' entry into Iraq. Already, several years down the road from events in Iraq, the Palestinian Territories, Algeria, and Egypt the ruling Arab regimes are letting their fear of extinction in the face of Islamists dictate their political behaviour with the tacit blessing of their Western government supporters. These events do beg the question of whether Islamist parties would behave any differently when/if in power. This is particularly true since the Turkish example with a strong secular infrastructure supported by both people and the military and which has several instances of military cooperation with the Israel,<sup>16</sup> does not lend itself to repetition.

#### *On women*

Prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, much of the Western media was inundated with news and documentaries about the oppressive conditions that Afghan women were undergoing under the Taliban regime. However, this vast media machine failed to notice that the Taliban were in power for over 15 years before September the 11th 2001, happened, and none of these years were any different for Afghan women. Nevertheless, the impression was that the Western world was not only going into Afghanistan to eradicate terrorism, but was also to liberate the oppressed Afghani Muslim women. The same dynamic took place, and indeed continues to unfold, with Iraqi women. It has been conveniently forgotten that under Saddam's notoriously oppressive rule, Iraq had the highest number of women in its legislative assembly and active within its political parties, compared to any other Arab country. US and European policy-makers are seemingly tripping over each other to debate and consider how 'foreign intervention' can help Iraqi/Muslim/Arab (all in the same stead) women.

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(16) In spite of the Davos tiff between Turkish and Israeli political leaders.

Interestingly, this is the same argument that former colonial powers have articulated as a way to legitimize their presence in any country. Leila Ahmad presents this fact in her seminal work on Women and Gender in Islam, and gives the example of Lord Cromer during British colonialism in Egypt. According to Ahmed, Cromer cited the 'backward' condition of Muslim women as a means to partially justify why it was that the British had a civilizing mission to undertake in Egypt. "It seems the more things change, the more they stay the same". Why is this moralising of a colonial agenda relevant to Islamism?

The clamour within the US establishment to 'support' Muslim women all works to underline the argument that the great civilizing mission of the western world includes, as a significant part of its mandate, the 'liberation' of Muslim women.<sup>17</sup> And yet many Muslim women, in all their diversity and forms of activism, have been insistent that this is not necessarily the kind of assistance they require from their western sisters and brothers.

There is a gender dimension to the interaction between Islamists and their non-Islamist counterparts, and this is simultaneously a flashback to the bad old days of colonialism. Activists for women's rights in the Muslim world, together with those intellectuals arguing for both moderate Islamic and secular political dynamics, are always attempting to ward off criticisms from two sides:<sup>18</sup> the religious right-wing in their own countries for whom they are never 'authentic' or 'Islamic' enough and the Western right wing, which sees much of what takes place in the Muslim world as principally anti-Western.

In view of the contemporary political context, both right wing discourses are aggravated, which tightens the noose around all topics of moderate discourse - including advocacy for women's rights. In this situation, a backlash against women's rights discourse, and by implication, a 'third way' of thinking politically, socially, culturally and economically in the Muslim world and amongst Muslim communities, is muted. A vicious cycle is perpetrated: with the muted moderate discourse emerges a louder radical one which in turn, leads to further antagonisms and conflict.

Yet, assessing where various parties stand on the 'question of women in the Muslim world' is incomplete without adding an important political twist. The

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(17) For more reading on the emerging behaviour of the United States' empire, see George Monbiot's 'The logic of Empire', in *The Guardian Weekly*, August 15-20, p. 11; and Philip Golub's 'Westward the Course of Empire', in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, as quoted in *The Guardian Weekly*, September, 2002, p. 6.

(18) I have elaborated on the relationship between political Islam and women's activism and the manner in which a gender discourse is intimately connected to the power dynamics that take place between Islamist political thought and governmental reactions, in *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).

parliamentary elections in Egypt at the beginning of 2006, which, despite government harassment and intimidation, witnessed a rise in the Muslim Brotherhood presence to become approximately a fifth of the parliamentary representation, together with the success of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections, have been attributed - among many things - to the role of the women in these parties. Although the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood does not have women in its shura (consultative) council (its main decision-making body), women are nevertheless a key part of its outreach as well as its constituency.

The same applies to Hamas, which boasts a wide popularity among women as well as their representation in the newly formed Palestinian Assembly. Both as articulators and disseminators of the ideology, and as voters, women have provided the edge to the ascent of the Islamist parties in these two countries. This is bound to have repercussions on the extent to which these parties formulate their policies on a range of critical social issues, and will undoubtedly play a role in the interaction these parties have with those in the Western world who are so concerned for Arab and Muslim women's well-being.

The decision making and activist roles attributed to and played by women in these parties can also act as significant markers in distinguishing between moderate and radical Islamists. Moderate Islamists have women members active in the various echelons of the party structure and different parties have differing numbers of women in various positions within the hierarchy. These women are not hidden from view, but on the contrary, play visible and public roles (e.g. the AK party's wives of the President and Prime Minister). Radical Islamists however, as a rule, rarely have women in their decision-making structures and if they did, it would not be public. Radical Islamists have not shied away from recruiting women to carry out acts associated with violence, whether to carry and deliver arms, or even as suicide bombers. The distinction becomes far less clear cut, however, in the Palestinian context, where Hamas too has been alleged to recruit women suicide bombers, and indeed where one Christian woman is rumoured to have carried out a suicide mission.<sup>19</sup>

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(19) See Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (USA: Rodale Inc., 2003).

## ACT III - Blowback and Regional and International Implications of Islamist Ascendancy to Power

What of Islamism in a Western world? Although the radical Islamists will argue that they struggle for a world where Islam rules, the movements have different priorities when operating within the Western hemisphere. The first statements made by former American President George W. Bush immediately after the World Trade Center attacks, characterized the events as an 'attack on freedom', and 'on [American] values'. However Bin Laden referred to these same events as a response to (if not retaliation against) 'the triumph of the unjust over weak victims' (nasrul-thalim `alal mustad`affien), clearly referring to US, Western and Arab regimes as the unjust. This aspect of injustice features strongly in much of the discourse of Osama Bin Laden, and the broader Islamist movement.

There are many theories that purport a historical antagonism (or struggle) between the 'West' (sometimes represented by the US) and the 'Islamic/Muslim' world.<sup>20</sup> But the resentment held by the Islamists vis-à-vis the United States is not a matter that requires much delving into history. Instead, radical Islamism, such as that seen in the acts of September 11, 2001, events in Madrid, London and elsewhere is quite simply captured in the term elaborated upon by Chalmers Johnson: 'blowback'.

The term "blowback", which officials of the Central Intelligence Agency first invented for their own use...refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people. What the daily press reports as the malign acts of "terrorists" or "drug lords" or "rogue states" or "illegal arms merchants" often turn out to be blowback from earlier American operations (Johnson, 2001: 8)

It is old news by now that present-day 'terrorists', such as the Taliban, the late Saddam Hussein and his regime, are all former 'friends' of the United States. In some instances, they were even financially and militarily supported by the US. Still lacking from official rhetoric of the US regimes is why (and at what point) did the former 'good guys' become 'bad guys'?

Whatever the explanation for the 'change of heart', there is one good analogy to this form of blowback which 'happened' to one of the regimes in the Middle East, which is both a regional leader and a close US ally: Egypt. In the early 1970s, the late Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat came to power as President of Egypt after the death of the charismatic socialist and Arab nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. One of Sadat's key aims was to counter the overriding

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(20) Huntington, 1993; Emerson, 2002; Kramer, 1993.

popularity of Nasser's socialist ideology. As a strategy to achieve this, he freed some of the Islamists imprisoned under the Nasser regime and turned a blind eye to their attempts to regroup. Eventually, Sadat's capitalism, which seemed to benefit a tiny elite, paled against Islamist ideology. The latter became more popular by the provision and management of an extensive network of social services to Egypt's most economically disenfranchised. And yet, when he turned against Islamists and all political opposition in his famous political 'purge' of September 1980, Sadat only managed to enrage his population. Finally, on the 6th of October, 1981, Sadat was murdered by precisely the same forces he had unleashed, and then attempted to 'contain'. His assassination was part of the blowback against his own actions and those of his regime.

Where the United States boasts the Christian Coalition,<sup>21</sup> mainland European countries in the 1990s and first few years of the 21st Century hosted a re-emergence of right wing political thought. It was championed by figures such as French Le Pen, and the late Dutch Pim Fortyn. Even where the star of the respective figureheads faded, much of their political rhetoric, which appealed to some of their economically disgruntled populations, was incorporated into mainstream political discourse.

It is risky to believe that control can be exerted once individuals have espoused an ideology about the implementation of 'God's rules' or any absolutist values. And yet it is remarkable how many regimes and individuals will attempt to do just that to either gain or consolidate power, locally and internationally. The formation of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority in 1979, which initiated what is today referred to as the Christian Coalition, or the "religious right", i.e. the entrance of religion into the political fray. It has now become common practice in contemporary and supposedly secular US politics. As Terence Samuel writes in an article entitled 'The Peak of Political Power' on the United States,

[T]he evangelical movement is firmly entrenched in the nation's political life, lobbying and leveraging like any of the hundreds of other pressure groups in Washington out to advance their causes and promote their issues. The Christian Coalition's Web site is a beehive of political advocacy, and not just on traditional issues like abortion and school prayer ...the Coalition worked doggedly on behalf of GOP [Grand Old Party - The Republican Party] candidates during the last election and might well take credit for swinging the Senate.<sup>22</sup>

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(21) See for instance also Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religious Diverse Nation* (San Francisco, 2001); and John Danforth's *Faith and Politics: How the Moral Values Debate Divides America and How to Move it Forward Together* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).

(22) In *US News and World Report* (December 23 2002, p. 42)

The Christian Coalition urges deeper and more active involvement of the US administration in Muslim countries. From supporting the civil war in the Sudan on behalf of the Christian and animist South, to assisting Israel by returning all the Jewish peoples to Jerusalem and the Promised Land in order to hasten the second coming of Christ, the legacy of the Coalition and its like-minded allies can and does contribute to the violent blowback the US has and will witness. **Even with a new US Administration in power, which has gently but surely distanced itself from the Christian Right, the rhetoric resulting from the mix of faith and politics will not diminish. In fact, one can argue that once on the opposition side, this rhetoric will become even louder.**

The course which the former George W. Bush Administration embarked in Afghanistan and in Iraq, the 'war on terror'/'war of ideologies', boosted the legitimacy and credibility of Islamism as a whole. Now, not only the US but increasingly most European nations are perceived by radical Islamist protagonists, to be clashing with the 'ideology' of Islam. Since current regimes cannot and do not appear to be able to resist, Islamists have profiled themselves as the 'heroes' – defenders of Islam and Muslim nations.

Nevertheless, moderate Islamism has a different trajectory which requires distinction from acts of armed violence and terrorising of innocent people. Such acts have in the past seriously de-legitimised Islamism within and outside of Islamic majority countries.<sup>23</sup> In such countries, Islamism is a multi-faceted attempt to transform the ruling regime(s) and societies into a more Islamic and, purportedly, 'just' reality. In Western contexts, where moderate Islamism has yet to be increasingly heard, pockets of radical Islamists (as with some fiery former Imams of mosques in New York and London) are also intent on some form of 'justice'. Whereas there is nothing to justify the murders of hundreds of innocent civilians, why is it inconceivable that such Islamists also have their own version of 'collateral damage'?

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(23) As referred to earlier in the aftermath of the Luxor massacre in Egypt, the massacres carried out by the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armee) during the civil war in Algeria, and the suicide bombings still carried out against civilians in Israel for example.

## ACT IV - Can Moderate Islamists be Strategic Allies?

*"The Taliban need to be engaged in the political process...[otherwise] the US attacks are unifying Islamist radicals in Afghanistan today...There is a split between Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban...and if the Americans cannot see this, it is a lost opportunity for all of us"<sup>24</sup>*

The traditional reality of opposition between nation states and non-state actors has been increasingly challenged by morphing of some of these non-state actors. Some of which have become de facto and de jure political parties. Some, like Hizbullah, straddle both state and non-state perimeters.

What is currently at play, whether in the Western hemisphere or in the Islamic-majority countries, is radical religious discourse, which, sees violence as legitimate whether it is labelled as self-defence, resistance or pre-emption, harps on cultural clashes and is diametrically opposed to international conventions honouring women and children,<sup>25</sup> in the name of family values. This has to be distinguished from a religio-political discourse which spurns violence, and which indicates preparedness for those who will look and listen to work peacefully towards some semblance of international social justice.

By rendering all Islamists as enemies, and thus failing to see the distinctions between the moderates and actively targeting them for negotiations and strategic alliances, Western countries risk furthering the image of themselves as 'crusaders against Islam', which in turn, would consolidate the perception that some radical Islamists maintain of themselves, as the (only) defenders of 'justice'. What is perpetuated is therefore a vicious cycle where misperceptions feed upon each other.

President Obama's latest attempt, in his address on the occasion of Persian New Year (Nawruz) to make a subtle distinction between people and regime is a significant symbolic gesture. A similarly significant event, is the recent informal meeting between the Iranians and NATO (the first such contact in 30 years)<sup>26</sup> and their eventual attendance in US-backed talks on Afghanistan (in the first week of April 2009). However, in view of what has already transpired, these are the political equivalent of a drop of rain water in a parched landscape.

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(24) Pakistani Intelligence Officer, in a BBC Radio 4 documentary programme, October 7, 2008.

(25) It is interesting to note that whether it is the Christian Coalition of the US or radical Islamists such as the Taliban, both have serious problems with the United Nations as a viable entity, and with the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

(26) BBC World News, March 27, 2009 - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7966263.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7966263.stm) (April 1, 2009).

Engaged political voices on the right of the religious spectrum have been louder than at any other time in the 20th and 21st centuries in the US and in the Muslim world. The question is whether it may be time to broaden the political space to include moderate religious voices. As 'desecularization' becomes more widespread, could this be a window of opportunity for religious peace-makers to intervene? Could an alternative religious discourse, which emerges through democratic praxis and espouses the rhetoric of democracy, as well as draws its legitimacy and inspiration from successes achieved by religious communities in their roles as peace-builders,<sup>27</sup> actually present a new moment in political discourse?

My contention here is that **moderate Islamists are, de facto, viable interlocutors for any regime (in the West and in Islamic majority countries) intent on pre-empting violent attacks on their soil.**<sup>28</sup> **Engaging moderate Islamists is a necessary first step in the long-term direction of opening the political space, which is currently locked into an unrealistic Islamist/religious vs. non-Islamist/secular dialectic.**

I have elsewhere argued that a wiser approach is what we are seeing the beginnings of now: Stop the vice of death by strangulation currently being imposed on the Hamas government by the US and Israeli administrations, and others, and instead, to negotiate and form strategic alliances with some of the moderates in these sorts of Islamist parties. In the Islamic world, bringing the relatively more moderate elements within the Taliban who have popular support, into political negotiations, in Afghanistan; ceasing attempts at forceful isolation and random imprisonment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and opening the broader political space for different hues, would be a critical start.

Detractors, sceptics, and hawks would balk at this contention and question why it is that Western support would provide legitimacy for moderate religious discourse, when the same support seems to boost angry Islamists around the world? The moderate Islamists mentioned above, are legitimately elected into power and are thus by and large representative of what peoples in these countries want. It is credible and expected that Western governments deal with these regimes elected by popular will, instead of continuing to endorse those who have no legitimacy. Moreover, it is worthwhile reiterating that some of the

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(27) For more on this, see Mohammed Abu-Nimer, 2001; Marc Gopin, 2000; Jonathan Fox, 2001; Chadwick Alger, 2002; Scott Appelby 1999; Douglas Johnston et al. (eds.), 1994; and Robert Johansen, 1997.

(28) A similar point is also articulated by March Lynch in *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2007), in an article entitled 'Brothers in Arms' and in which he maintains that "the United States and the Muslim Brotherhood have more in common than they think" (pp.70-74). Lynch, talking specifically to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, argues that they need to win over American skeptics, especially since some Americans see them as "a relatively moderate force and a potential partner in a common struggle for democracy and against Islamic extremism" (p.70).

regimes in Islamic majority countries themselves, are in some form of either negotiation or even accommodation with moderate Islamists.

Furthermore, if indeed the contention is to be believed that this is an ideological struggle, with the forces of democracy battling against those of darkness and dogmatism, then ignoring the democratic will as expressed by a majority stands as a clear contradiction. Even if we were to accept the rather tenuous assertion that Western governments are not obliged to deal with any ideological opponents simply because they are popularly elected (and here the list of countries from various continents in that category which western governments nevertheless deal with is plentiful), then, equally, democratically elected governments should not be obliged to succumb to demands they are principally against. That would be the essence of a democratic engagement.

There is little doubt in the minds of many Muslims today that events in the occupied Palestinian Territories, in Lebanon, and in Israel, will serve to enhance the stature of Islamism as a whole, while simultaneously emphasising the legitimacy of the radical Islamists' urge to violent resistance. If this is a war of ideology, then the ideology of the oppressed has already triumphed. And across the Islamic world, Hamas is currently perceived – collectively – as the oppressed martyr, and Hizbullah as the liberator.

A further question would be why endorse or attempt to support any religious discourse, when, clearly, the over-involvement of religion is part of present day dilemmas in the first place? The answer is simple: **religion is here to stay**, at least for a while, and after the litany of misjudgement undertaken by Western regimes in the Middle East, Islamism is not going anywhere in a hurry. Islamist thought and praxis shifts and adjusts with time, and as the Iraqi debacle, West Bank grief and events in Lebanon continue to highlight, isolating and alienating religio-political moderates is counterproductive.

Real politik imposes its own dynamics on the most intransigent of personalities and parties. This was witnessed to some extent in Turkey with the ascent – and ongoing triumph – of the Islamist Justice and Development (AK) to power. This not only gives a chance to supporters to assess the party in light of actual achievements in power as opposed to being an untried – or victimized – alternative. It also gives the ideologues a chance to adjust both rhetoric and action to more workable parameters by creating strategic alliances both nationally and globally, engendering productivity, and delivering on people's economic and political expectations. When all is said and done about the deficiencies and specificities of the Turkish Islamist experiment, it remains one where moderate Islamism is clearly acclimatising and adjusting with ups and downs but overall relatively peacefully, to changing political exigencies.

## ACT V - Seizing the 'Yes We Can' moment

We began this article cautioning that it is politically unwise to alienate all Islamists and push them into overlooking their own differences. It is far more astute to monitor the natural schisms created amongst Islamists when they try their hand at governance - and indeed, to honour the democratic principles requiring working with them in doing the job they were democratically elected or popularly mandated to do. In this manner, strategic alliances would be created that would have an impact on the ideology, language, rhetoric and trajectory of political Islam. This, in turn, would have a wider ripple effect on the evolution of political discourse within the Islamic-majority countries and outside of it. Until Islamism is tried and tested in the everyday grit of the political street, the dominant perception of it - especially to a huge swath of youth deprived of the sense of political influence - will remain in largely idealistic terms. When Islamism is tried in an environment that is not seen as inimical, it can become one of many political ideologies that can engender different offshoots in the long run as its predecessors, the Christian Democrats, eventually did.

This is not to argue that this evolution is necessarily only positive and will take place overnight. But it is a far safer bet than the current policy which has effectively bankrupt Western political capital, which boosts the language of victimization, armed struggle and indeed, of martyrdom, as well as the 'survival of the fittest' paradigm that currently dominates all sides of the debate in the Middle Eastern region. Thus far the current paradigm has only resulted in cyclical episodes of violence and death.

While there has been much speculation about what US President Barack Obama meant, intended, implied and quoted, in his video address to the Iranian people referenced earlier, what is just as significant is what he did not say, or refer to. While there was a reference to terrorism, President Obama notably omitted specific mention of the most troubling problems in Iran's relationship with the US and its allies, i.e. Tehran's nuclear programme, its links to groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah, and its hostility towards Israel. Coming after the rhetoric of the former Bush Administration, much of the actions of President Obama are deeply symbolic of the shifts in US policy towards the region. A shift which cannot fail but engender the hopeful praise of Islamist leaders (such as Hamas' Khaled Mashaal<sup>29</sup>) as well as hail exactly what this paper is arguing is absolutely necessary - dialoguing with those Islamists - at least those who have won the popular, and legitimate political mandate of their people.

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(29) Hamas's Syria-based leader as quoted in BBC World News - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7958037.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7958037.stm) (March 21, 2009)

*"The challenge for everybody is for this [language of President Obama] to be the prelude for a genuine change in US and European policies..."<sup>30</sup>*

What is called for is a new constellation of strategic alliances building on and embracing a discourse of justice for all, and seizing new opportunities. This new constellation must also be at once humble and brave enough to take a risk, acknowledge limits, and reach out to the unconventional.

And here I throw the gauntlet. To paraphrase President Obama slightly – and switch the shoe to the other foot (so to speak) European and American nations need to undertake peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of people, regimes and civilizations. And what better way to start, than with their own Muslim minorities?

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(30) Ibid.

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