

# “Clash of Civilizations”. Why the Delay in Islamic Reformation?

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*Recent geopolitical turmoil in the Arab/Muslim World, and the resulting proliferation of radical movements and groupings such as Al-Qaeda and ISIL, seems to have provided plenty of incendiary fodder for the propaganda mill of the proponents of the theory of “the clash of civilizations,” according to which the roots of conflicts in the Muslim world must be sought in Islam itself, in its alleged “incompatibility” with modernization and Western values [1].*

Instead of calling the Charlie Hebdo or the 9/11 terrorist attacks mass murder criminal acts, proponents of this pernicious theory do not seem to be able to resist the politically expedient temptation of calling them acts of “war on our way of life” [2].

Although questionable, this explanation of terrorism and the concomitant justification of war and militarism harbor an element of dangerously misleading plausibility: once the public is convinced that the “hostile and irredeemable Islam or Islamists are out in force to drown our civilization,” pre-emptive war would be hailed as the logical response. The danger is further compounded because this explanation of terrorism possesses the power of self-fulfilling prophecy, the power to make what is theorized appear real.

Not only do such explanations tend to sow the seeds of hatred and ignorance, and are bound to poison international relations, but they also fail the test of history. The history of the relationship between the modern Western world and the Muslim world shows that, contrary to distorted popular perceptions in the West, from the time of their initial contacts with the capitalist West more than two centuries ago until almost the final third of the twentieth century, the Muslim people were quite receptive of the economic and political models of the modern world.

During that period of more than a century and a half, the majority of the political elite and/or national leaders viewed the rise of the modern West, and its spread into their territories, as an inevitable historical development that challenged them to chart their own programs of reform and development. Not only did the political elite, the intellectuals, and government leaders view reform and modernization as the way of the future, but so did many Islamic leaders and scholars, known as “Islamic modernizers” [3].

It was only after more than a century and a half of imperialistic pursuits and a series of humiliating policies in the region that the popular masses of the Muslim world turned to religion and the conservative religious leaders as sources of defiance, mobilization, and self-respect. This historical background indicates that for many Muslims the recent turn to religion often represents not so much a rejection of Western values and achievements as it is a way to resist or defy the oppressive policies and alliances of Western powers in the Muslim world. It also means that explanations of derailed and delayed historical transitions

in the Muslim world, that is, of an Islamic reformation, rest more with the policies of the Western powers in the region than the alleged rigidity of Islam, or “the clash of civilizations.”

### Early Responses to the Challenges of the Modern World

Not only did the early modernizers of the Muslim world embrace Western technology, but they also welcomed its civil and state institutions, its representational system of government, and its tradition of legal and constitutional rights. For example, the Iranian intellectuals Mulkum Khan (1833-1908) and Agha Khan Kermani (1853-96) urged Iranians to acquire a Western education and replace the Shariah (the religious legal code) with a modern secular legal code. Secular political leaders of this persuasion joined forces with the more liberal religious leaders in the Constitution Revolution of 1906, and forced the Qajar dynasty to set up a modern constitution, to limit the powers of the monarchy and give Iranians parliamentary representation [4].

Even some of the Ottoman sultans (kings) pursued Western models of industrialization and modernization on their own. For example, Sultan Mahmud II “inaugurated the Tanzimat (Regulation) in 1826, which abolished the Janissaries [the fanatical elite corps of troops organized in the 14th century], modernized the army and introduced some of the new technology.” In 1839 Sultan Abdulhamid “issued the Gulhane decree, which made his rule dependent upon a contractual relationship with his subjects, and looked forward to major reforms of the empire’s institutions” [5].

More dramatic, however, were the modernizing and/or secularizing programs of Egypt’s renowned modernizers Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) and his grandson Ismail Pasha (1803-95). They were so taken by the impressive achievements of the West that they embarked on breakneck modernizing programs that were tantamount to trying to hothouse the Western world’s achievements of centuries into decades: “To secularize the country, Muhammad Ali simply confiscated much religiously endowed property and systematically marginalized the Ulema [religious leaders], divesting them of any shred of power” [6].

In the face of dire conditions of underdevelopment and humiliating but unstoppable foreign domination, these modernizing national leaders viewed reformation not only as the way out of underdevelopment but also out of the yoke of foreign domination.

Not only the secular intellectuals, the political elite, and government leaders but also many Islamic leaders and scholars, known as “Islamic modernizers,” viewed modernization as the way of the future. But whereas the reform programs and policies of the political/national leaders often included secularization, at least implicitly, Islamic modernizers were eclectic: while seeking to adopt the sources of the strength of the West, including constitutionalism and government by representation, they wanted to preserve their cultural and national identities as well as Islamic principles and values as the moral foundation of the society. These Islamic modernizers included Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Qasim Amin (1863-1908), and Shaikh Muhammad Hussain Naini in Egypt and Iran; and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) and Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938) in India.

To be sure, there was resistance to change. But, by and large, nationalist reformers in many Muslim countries did manage to pursue vigorous agendas of social, economic, and political change. John Esposito, one of the leading experts of Islamic studies in the United States,

describes the early attitude of the political and economic policy makers of the Muslim world toward the modern world of the West:

Both the indigenous elites, who guided government development programs in newly emerging Muslim states, and their foreign patrons and advisers were Western-oriented and Western-educated. All proceeded from a premise that equated modernization with Westernization. The clear goal and presupposition of development was that every day and in every way things should become more modern (i.e., Western and secular), from cities, buildings, bureaucracies, companies, and schools to politics and culture. While some warned of the need to be selective, the desired direction and pace of change were unmistakable [7].

### Distorted, Derailed and Delayed Reformation

Resistance to change is not limited to Muslims or the Muslim world; change almost always generates resistance. In fact, the Christian Church's nearly 400-year resistance to capitalist transformation in Europe was even more traumatic than that of the Muslim world. The resulting travail of transition created more social turbulence than has been observed in the context of the Muslim world. Whereas the Church of the Middle Ages anathemized the very idea of gain, the pursuit of gain and the accumulation of property are considered noble pursuits in Islam.

Opponents of transition to capitalism in Europe not only tried (and almost hanged) Robert Keane for having made a six-percent profit on his investment and "prohibited merchants from carrying unsightly bundles" of their merchandise, but also "fought for the privilege of carrying on in its fathers' footsteps" [8]. As Karen Armstrong, author of a number of scholarly books on religious fundamentalism, points out, during the nearly 400 years of transition, the Western people often "experienced . . . bloody revolutions, reigns of terror, genocide, violent wars of religion, the despoliation of the countryside, vast social upheavals, exploitation in the factories, spiritual malaise and profound anomie in the new megacities" [9].

Muslim societies, like less-developed societies elsewhere, are expected, or compelled by the imperatives of the world market, to traverse the nearly four hundred-year journey of the West in a much shorter period of time. Furthermore, the travails of transition in the case of these belatedly developing countries (*vis-à-vis* the case of early developers of the West) are often complicated by foreign interventions and imperial/colonial pressures from outside. External pressure has included not only direct colonial and/or imperial military force, but also covert and creeping pressure exerted from the more subtle market forces and agents such as the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization and credit rating agencies like Standard & Poor's and Moody's.

Despite its turbulence, the painful process of transition to capitalism in the West was largely an internal process; no foreign force or interference could be blamed for the travails of transition. And the pains of transitions were thus gradually and grudgingly accepted as historical inevitabilities. Not so in the case of belatedly developing countries. Here, the pains of change and transition are sometimes perceived not as historical necessities but as products of foreign designs or imperialist schemes. Accordingly, the agony of change is often blamed (especially by the conservative proponents of the status quo) on external forces or powers: colonialism, imperialism, and (now) neo-liberalism.

Actual foreign intervention, realizing and reinforcing such perceptions, has thus had a retarding or delaying impact on the process of reform in the Muslim world. For intervention from outside often plays into the hands of the conservative, obscurantist elements that are quite adept at portraying their innate opposition to change as a struggle against foreign intrusion, thereby reinforcing resistance to reform, especially religious reform. Today, for example, U.S. and European interventions in the internal affairs of many countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Jordan, Turkey, and Nigeria far from facilitating the process of reform or helping the forces of change in these countries, are actually hurting such forces and delaying reform as they plays into the hands of their conservative opponents and strengthens the forces of resistance.

Contrary to the rising political influence of “radical Islamists” in recent years/decades, radical Islamic circles of the earlier periods did not sway much power over the direction of national economies and policies. Their opposition to Western values and influences was often in the form of passive “rejection or elusion” [10]. They simply refused to cooperate or deal with the colonial powers and their institutions (such as modern Western school systems) spreading in their midst:

“They did not attempt to assume direct political control but used their position to preserve tradition as best as they could under the rapidly changing conditions of the time.” And while they “remained an important factor in influencing public opinion . . . , they basically used their position to encourage obedience to those in power” [11].

To the extent that conservative Islamic figures or groups actively opposed policies of change, such obscurantist challenges were almost always defeated, coerced, or co-opted by the modernizing, reforming, or revolutionary secular nationalist leaders. Thus, in all the major social movements of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century (that is, in the anti-colonial/anti-imperial national liberation movements as well as in the subsequent radical reform movements of a “non-capitalist” or “socialist-oriented” character of the 1950s and 1960s) national leadership and economic development programs lay with secular nationalists.

Those programs were fashioned either after the U.S. model of economic development, as in the case of the Shah of Iran and the King of Jordan, or after the Soviet model of “non-capitalist development,” as in the cases of Nasser’s Egypt, for example. While it is now relatively easier to see, in hindsight, the shortcomings and the failures of those development programs, such programs did at the time hold promises of lifting the respective societies out of dependence, poverty, and underdevelopment.

As long as the hopes and aspirations that were thus enlivened remained animated, the appeals of vague promises of an “Islamic alternative” were not strong enough to challenge the rule of the secular nationalist leaders and their development programs—and that meant, as mentioned earlier, the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, it became clear that the largely US-sponsored industrialization and development programs in the Muslim (and other less-developed) countries were highly selective, extremely uneven and mostly geared to the interests of transnational corporations and their elite comprador allies in the host countries. All the propitious factors and circumstances that had until then nurtured the dreams of economic

progress, democratic rights, and political sovereignty seemed unreal and disappointing. And as those hopes and dreams turned sour, the promises of an “Islamic alternative” began to sound appealing—hence, the resurgence of “political Islam” since the 1970s.

In Brief, historical evidence refutes the claim that Islam and/or the Muslim world are inherently incompatible with modernization, and that, therefore, the rise of an Islamic militancy in the last several decades, and the violent reactions such as the Charlie Hebdo and 9/11 terrorist attacks, are essentially manifestations of “the clash of civilizations.”

Close scrutiny of the Muslim world’s early responses to the challenges of the modern West reveals that, despite sporadic resistance, the overall policy was moving in the direction of reform and adaptation. That policy of adaptation and openness continued from the time of the Muslim world’s initial contacts with the modern world in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries until approximately the last third of the twentieth century. The recent resistance to Western values and the quest for a return to the Islamic ethos—and the concomitant delay in the Islamic reformation—are therefore more the products of interventionist geopolitical policies of Western powers than the purported rigidity of Islam.

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[2] This essay draws heavily on Chapter 5 of my book, *The Political Economy of U.S. Militarism* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2007).

[3] John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, Second ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

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[10] Wu Guying, “Middle East: The Roots of Conflict,” *Asia Times* (22 November 2002): <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/DK22Ak05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/DK22Ak05.html)>.

[11] John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (cited above), p. 94.

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