

Religion and Nationalism in the Arab World

James G. Mellon

Volume 20, numéro 2, fall 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs20_2re02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Mellon, J. G. (2000). Religion and Nationalism in the Arab World. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 20(2), 137–143.

Religion and Nationalism in the Arab World

Lewis, Bernard. *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*. London: Phoenix, 1999.

Ajami, Fouad. *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1999.

Humphreys, R. Stephen. *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*. Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1999.

Moussali, Ahmad S. *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999.

Tibi, Bassam. *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*. Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1998.

Hunter, Shireen T. *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Coexistence?* Westport, CT and London: Praeger with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 1998.

An interest in the influence of religion on international politics led this reviewer to the study of the Middle East as one of a number of regions in which it is clear that a relationship exists among religion, nationalism and international politics. As a consequence, the region provides a useful case study for the assessment of theoretical notions of the influence of religion on international politics. That there is some interaction seems clear. What is less clear, however, is the precise nature of that relationship. This review essay will survey some of the approaches that have been adopted in recent scholarship.

There are a number of forms in which the relationship between religion and nationalism may express itself. In a metaphorical sense, nationalism as an ideology with a distinctive belief-system and world-view is frequently likened to a religion. In a more practical sense, religion, along with such other factors as language and ethnicity, is seen as a characteristic defining a particular nation, distinguishing it from neighbouring nations. On the other hand, however, most of the great world religions see themselves as embodying a message addressed, at least in principle and potentially, to a universal audience. In a practical sense, religious affiliation frequently crosses national frontiers, and religion may cross other cleavages as often as, or even more often than it coincides with them. Some contemporary religious/nationalist conflicts, like that of Northern Ireland, are of long standing; some, such as that of Bosnia, asserted or reasserted themselves only in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the discipline imposed by the strategic and ideological confrontation between East and West. While such conflicts are frequently cited as illustrations of the divisive aspects associated with a world characterized by religious pluralism, religion also frequently operates to restrain potential conflict, and to provide an allegiance that transcends national borders.

The result is that the implications of any of the major religions for nationalism is both important and ambiguous.

It is suggested, by Samuel Huntington for example, that, with the end of the Cold War, a new confrontation may be emerging between Western-style liberal democracy and market economics, on the one hand, and Islamic fundamentalism, on the other.¹ The latter term, "Islamic fundamentalism," is an inappropriate one; the current upsurge in support for traditional Islamic values in many societies would be better described as "Islamism" or "Islamic revivalism." It should also be noted that Islam and the particular expression of it associated with Islamic revivalism is manifested differently in different, predominantly Islamic societies, and in dissimilar ways within a number of these societies. Some, but by no means all, of these manifestations are associated with an acceptance of violence as a means of advancing a political cause. It would, nevertheless, be misleading to equate Islamic revivalism with support for terrorism. A number of recent works disagree with Huntington's thesis. John Esposito's *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* stresses the diversity within the Islamic world, and points out the ways in which Westerners, on the one hand, and members of predominantly Islamic societies, on the other, sometimes misinterpret and mistrust each other's intentions.² Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser, in *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*, suggest that tensions are more likely to emerge within predominantly Islamic societies, and between the so-called First World, on the one hand, and the so-called Third World, on the other, in regard to issues of trade and economic development.³ Fred Halliday suggests that Westerners who refer to an "Islamic threat" and proponents of radical Islamism both frequently mischaracterize Islamism as the only authentic expression of Islam.⁴ Each of these works suggest that tensions that may arise between the West and predominantly Islamic societies should be manageable if approached appropriately. It is clear that in some of its manifestations - Hizballah and Islamic Jihad, for example - Islamic revivalism expresses itself in a manner that accepts the use of violence as a means. There are, however, other quite different manifestations of Islamic revivalism. It would be unfortunate if exaggerated fears and ethnic stereotypes thwarted genuine opportunities for enhanced understanding.

In studying the politics of any region, the issue arises as to whether it is appropriate to focus on the particularities of that region - its specific history, culture and traditions - or to emphasize the region's place in global socio-economic and geopolitical processes and frameworks. In the context of studies of the Middle East, the former tendency, sometimes referred to as "Orientalism," has been criticized by writers like Edward Said.⁵ Said's critique is directed at the Western tradition characterized, for example, by the use of such Eurocentric terms as "Eastern" and "Oriental" that emphasize the distinctiveness of the region from the so-called "West."

The issue is the relative backwardness of the Arab world economically and technologically. Arabs recall a golden age historically during which the Arab world was relatively advanced scientifically and technologically compared with Europe in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Empire in the West. The issue is also the political instability and strategic vulnerability of the region. Scholars like Bernard Lewis tend to

focus on assessing the implications of distinctive elements of Arab tradition. Others like Said emphasize the effects of imperialism and neocolonialism.

Among contemporary scholars, Bernard Lewis, who has authored numerous works on the Middle East, is most often criticized by writers like Said who are critics of the sort of approach they would consider Orientalist. In his recent contribution to the field, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Lewis demonstrates, in a discussion accessible to the non-specialist, general reader, that until the late nineteenth century the typical resident of the region would have identified him/herself as a subject of a particular lord, as from a particular town or village, as a speaker of a particular tongue, whether Arabic, Turkish, Persian (or Farsi), Berber or Kurdish, and as a believer in a particular faith, whether Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism or one of a number of Christian rites and denominations. Lewis observes that individuals tended not to identify themselves in terms of nations or in terms of either Arab nationalism or nationalism associated with specific states, either those then existing or those that exist today. Nor was ethnicity as prominent in people's conceptions of their own identity as allegiance, locality, religion or language, Lewis suggests. Lewis relates the emergence of nationalism in Germany and Italy in the nineteenth century to the studies of philologists into folk and linguistic traditions, and suggests that the notion of an Arab nation and Arab nationalism reflected a common language, in spite of some differences in dialect. Not speaking Arabic, the Turks, Iranians and Kurds have seen themselves as being distinct nations.

This is not trivial. Over the past century, a number of powerful movements have influenced the politics of the Middle East. The sense of a shared linguistic and literary tradition has inspired a pan-Arab nationalism. This nationalism is sometimes expressed in the pursuit of a single Arab political voice in international affairs, and sometimes in the pursuit of a vision of a cultural unity. Competing with this has been a pan-Islamic movement inspired by a widely-shared Islamic faith. Also competing with these movements have been nationalisms associated with specific states. It should be noted that much of the expression of pan-Arab nationalism has adopted the form of secular nationalism, sometimes associated with liberalism and sometimes socialism, and that a number of the most notable proponents of pan-Arab nationalism have come from one or another of the Arab Christian communities. It should also be noted that some of the most notable proponents of pan-Islamic nationalism have been non-Arabs. One thinks, for example, of the regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.

Much of the region was governed until about 1920 by the Ottoman Empire. With the break-up of the Ottoman Empire as an outcome of the settlement following the First World War, nationalist aspirations were frustrated by British and French mandates under the League of Nations. British effective control over Egypt, dating back to 1882, came to an end in 1923 but British and French authority over much of the former Ottoman territories persisted until after the Second World War. Like much of the Third World, these parts of the region experienced imperialism. This returns us to Said's emphasis on the implications for the region of its position relative to North-South and East-West relations. Throughout the Middle East, there has been over the past century a sense that the region has failed to catch up with the West economically and technologically. This

same perception of a continuing failure to challenge the West, or even the rapidly developing economies of South Asia, economically and technologically, combined with the apparent acquiescence of adherents of traditional Islam in the relative backwardness and corruption in societies in this region, has led some toward Islamic modernism and a secular Arab nationalism. This seeks to marry the best of traditional Islamic and Arab values with elements of the Enlightenment and liberalism. Others have moved toward what is sometimes inaptly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism" and can more appropriately be termed "Islamism" or "Islamic revivalism."

Fouad Ajami's *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* looks back on the dream of Islamic modernism and secular Arab nationalism that inspired many intellectuals of the generation who entered public and academic life in the fifties. Many of these intellectuals were inspired by the achievement of independence in some states, by the emergence of Nasserism and by the Suez War. They represented the first of their families to leave traditional village life and to pursue an education that exposed them to what the West had to offer, and the disparities between the Arab world and the West. In 1967, it was not simply the defeat of the Arab states but the rapidity and extent of the defeat that exposed the hollowness of Nasserism. Hopes of making the dream come to fruition were further dashed by the existence of a number of ruthless and corrupt authoritarian regimes, the wave toward terrorism as a perceived solution for political injustice and recently the Islamic revivalist movement, at least in its more militant and more radical manifestations. Ironically, observes Adjami, the sudden turnaround in the fortunes of some of the traditionally poorest and least populous parts of the Arab world with the discovery of oil, the growth of oil production and the emergence of OPEC, contributed to the tensions within the Arab world, this new wealth, while making some fabulously wealthy, failed to transform the relative economic and strategic weakness of most of the region relative to the West. One cannot but be moved by Ajami's account of the predicament faced by the novelist Naguib Mahfuz. Recognition by the world at large in the form of a Nobel Prize for Literature did not prevent him from becoming the target of an assassination attempt. For many Egyptians, both intellectuals and ordinary people, Mahfuz was a national hero; for many others, his liberalism made him such a hated figure that his friends and admirers, with the assistance of the police, continue to go to some lengths to meet while maintaining his security.

R. Stephen Humphreys in *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age* critiques some of the stereotypes associated with Middle Eastern politics. Humphreys remarks on the paradox that a developing economy like that of Egypt has a large surplus of highly educated workers. He sees the region as one in which there persists continuing tension between the bonds of tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the aspirations of individuals and states to enjoy the benefits of economic development and technological progress. In his examination of the politics of the region, he considers four factors: the persistence of economic stagnation and its consequences; the strategic and economic vulnerability of the states in the region; the instability of many of the region's regimes; and the influence of religion and political culture. Humphreys seeks to include both cultural factors and factors related to strategic and economic vulnerability. One stereotype Humphreys challenges is the assumption that Arab regimes

are particularly prone to irrational decision-making. The persistence of such stereotypes, he suggests, is a consequence of a neglect on the part of academics, policy makers and journalists of the study of the region's politics. To say that decisions reflect a certain rationality is not, however, necessarily to say that such decisions are invariably wise ones. Problems arise from mutual Arab and Western misperceptions about one another's intentions.

In his *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State*, Ahmad S. Moussali makes a point of focussing on the theoretical arguments put forward by proponents of moderate and radical Islamism, and Islamic modernism. Proponents of Islamism, both radical and moderate, he argues, aim at the empowerment of the masses in the face of the challenges posed by modern high-tech, global capitalism. Moderate and radical Islamists, however, he explains, interpret Islamic concepts like tawhid (consensus/oneness with God) and shura (consultation) in different ways, and reach quite different conclusions in regard to such issues as the compatibility of Islam with democracy.

Bassam Tibi, in *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, emphasizes that political Islam is not identical with Islam per se, describing himself as a devout Moslem who is, nevertheless, concerned about the emergence of political Islam or Islamic "fundamentalism," which he sees as a politicization of religion typical of "fundamentalist" versions of other faiths, such as Hindu "fundamentalism" in India, which represent a challenge to the globalization of predominantly Western values. Nor should the challenge of Islamic "fundamentalism," he argues, be seen as identical with terrorism; political Islam, he asserts, has emerged as a powerful ideological force influencing how institutions like the nation-state within predominantly Islamic societies operate and are perceived. Tibi's approach differs from that of most students of international politics in that Tibi writes that "The argument I am dismissing here is that international politics in our era continues to be basically state politics." (p. 11) It also differs from most scholars on the subject by finding some value in this context in the concept of "fundamentalism," which he notes is quite different from "traditionalism." Islamists tend to hold the view that proponents of traditional Islam tended to be co-opted by the powers of the day. Tibi examines the interaction among what he sees as civilizations, which he considers to be increasingly salient in international relations, and concludes that "As a liberal Muslim I rather believe in a cultural and political pluralism that precludes the dominance of whatever civilization." (p. 113).

In *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Coexistence?*, Shireen T. Hunter challenges Huntington's theory that civilizational clash between Islam and the West is inevitable because of a presumed tenet of Islam that no distinction exists or can exist between the religious and political spheres. She suggests that in practice in predominantly Islamic societies the relation between these spheres has been more ambiguous. She points out that the influence of other elements of identity, like ethnicity and language, has somewhat moderated the influence of Islam on politics, and has limited the political coherence and unity of the Islamic world. In addition, argues Hunter, from the point of view of predominantly Islamic countries, conflicts between these countries

and the West has been at least as much an outcome in recent years of imbalances in strategic and economic clout relative to Western states as of some sort of inevitable civilizational incompatibility between the predominantly Islamic world and the West. As she points out, such a conclusion has implications for policy on the part of the West.

It is, of course, not necessarily the case that a decision to concentrate on the study of political culture in predominantly Islamic societies, or any other society, for that matter, invariably implies the view that political culture by itself explains everything, and that consideration of strategic and economic factors has no place. Said's critique is not entirely a methodological one; it implies that a focus on religion and political culture necessarily induces an ideological bias that neglects the imbalances and inequities of the global strategic and economic order. In contrast to this position, it would seem to be the case that a consideration of political culture need not preclude a recognition that politics takes place within particular strategic and political-economic contexts. Ignoring this can lead to viewing a particular political culture almost like some sort of museum specimen, but ignoring political culture can render analysis trivial, tautological or downright incomprehensible. A focus on the strategic and political-economic context is predicated on the assumption that actors seek to maximize those things that are valued but it either takes those values as given or relies on those who focus on political culture to fill in that information. Neither approach will suffice by itself but, in practice, there may be some division of labour among scholars as long as those on each side of the divide engage in intellectual cross-fertilization.

Attention to political culture need not be coupled with an assumption of homogeneity within a given society. Indeed, a competent approach to the study of a region's political culture will elaborate its authentic complexity and genuine diversity. If Huntington is simply saying that cultural factors will influence the character of such conflicts as arise, no one would argue with that but, if he is suggesting that "clash" between the forces of Islam and the West is inevitable, then such a thesis entails real problems. There must be some space between suggesting, on the one hand, that considerations of political culture are transparent fraud designed as disguise for the naked pursuit of power, and implying, on the other hand, that political cultures are so different that no common ground exists to permit dialogue.

All six of these books are well worth reading. Some, like those by Lewis, Ajami and Humphreys, will be of interest to the general reader. All six will be of interest to specialists in both political science and religious studies.

James G. Mellon
Halifax, NS

Endnotes

1. See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993).

2. See John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* rev. ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
3. See Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser, *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995).
4. See Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996).
5. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).