

Islam and International Security

James Mellon

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REVIEW ESSAY

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Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (rev. ed.). New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Fuller, Graham E., and Ian O. Lesser. *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995.

With the end of the Cold War, some have surmised that the next great challenge to the West will arise from a clash between Islam or Islamic fundamentalism and the West. Both of these books Esposito's *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* and Fuller and Lesser's *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* reject such a point of view. Both are critical of the tendency to reduce the diversity of Islamic approaches to a phenomenon referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism." The precise influence of Islam varies from country to country, as well as among Shii, Sunni and Sufi traditions. Within predominantly Islamic societies, there have arisen a number of responses to the weakness and apparent backwardness of such societies relative to the West. In the first half of this century, opposition to imperialism reflected in Ottoman or in Western political and economic domination sometimes was translated into Islamic nationalism, sometimes into Arab nationalism and sometimes into nationalism identified with a specific state. It might also be translated into outright rejection of all things Western, into secularism and Westernization, or into Islamic modernism, which emphasizes a compatibility between Islamic and Western values. The continuing failure of governments in Islamic societies to respond effectively to social and economic problems, the continuing apparent backwardness and weakness relative to the West, and the incompetence and corruption associated with a number of authoritarian regimes has led many across all segments of society to seek in Islam a reinvigoration of their society. Both books find the term "fundamentalism" with its connotations more appropriate to certain sorts of Protestantism to be inappropriate, and terms like Islamic revivalism or Islamism to be preferable.

A number of important points must be stressed. Islamic revivalism itself is a diverse phenomenon, varying from one national context to another, and varying within a number of national contexts from moderate to militant. Islamic revivalism is typically not a rush to some pre-modern traditional Islam. Frequently Islamic revivalists are quite critical of the traditional clergy for being either relatively apolitical, or for having been, in the view of Islamic revivalists, coopted by existing regimes. Also it should be noted that many Islamic revivalists are educated professionals who utilize all the sophisticated elements of video and computer technology to spread the message. Islamic revivalists in many countries have provided social services, provided ineffectively or not at all otherwise. Much of their popular support stems from this, and from the lack of other voices in opposition to existing regimes. The suppression of opposition political organizations

under a number of regimes has left Islamic organizations as the only organized voices critical of the ruling regime.

In *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, John L. Esposito challenges the tendency he sees among Westerners to think of Islam and the Islamic world as a homogeneous entity. He stresses and illustrates the diversity of the Islamic world and of Islamic revivalism, pointing out that some regimes and some organizations with roots in Islam have been sympathetic to the West and others have become known for deep and sometimes violent antagonism to the West. History, he notes, produced a legacy of tension and mistrust between the Western and Islamic worlds. This tension is, he argues, not insurmountable, but it does sometimes foster misunderstanding, situations in which each side is prone to misinterpret the other's true intentions. With specific accounts of the influence of the Islamic revival in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Iran, Libya, Lebanon, Pakistan and Tunisia, Esposito depicts a world more complex than stereotypes can do justice to. It is a "warts and all" portrait, illuminating both strengths and limitations. He emphasizes that the Islamic tradition is continually being reinterpreted in the light of experience and different contexts. Whether or not one is already, to a degree, familiar with the Islamic world, readers will find Esposito's work provides a useful survey. He forcefully supports his thesis that talk of some sort of homogeneous fanatical and intolerant pan-Islamic movement is ill-conceived. This book is recommended to the specialist and the general reader alike.

Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser, in *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*, question the assumption that, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, international politics will be defined by some sort of Islam-versus-West confrontation. A more likely clash, they argue, is one within Islam over the future direction of Islamic societies. Other divisions, such as that between North and South, will tend to coincide, however, with divisions between Islam and the West. Political Islam will, they suggest, associate itself with efforts to enhance the position of predominantly Islamic states relative to Western powers in an era in which the break-up of the Soviet Union confronts Third World states in general with an international arena dominated by a single superpower. The more dramatic struggle, however, in their view, will be within Islamic societies. They suggest that, in the immediate term, Islamist movements will derive strength from the fact that, as existing regimes face crises, Islamist movements represent, in many states, the only organized and effective opposition. Such groups wish to reassert conservative Islamic values. Such conservative values do not, however, Fuller and Lesser insist, as would Esposito, reflect the only authentically Islamic values. While Islamic nationalism may, in the short run, lead to awkward relations for the West with some Islamic states, this need not preclude, according to Fuller and Lesser, in the longer term, better relations as other strains within Islam also come to be expressed.

The tendency during the Cold War to view everything through a focus on a rivalry between East and West, between the Soviet Union and its allies, and the United States and its allies, and an emphasis in development and area studies on trends toward secularization contributed to a neglect of the study of the influence of Islam. Expressions of Islam were assumed to be either irrational and anachronistic, or disingenuous and

cynical manipulation of the uneducated masses for purposes of furthering either self-interest or some ideological cause, whether communism, capitalism or nationalism. Having rediscovered Islam, in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the activities of the Ayatollah Khomeini and of groups like *Hizballah* and *Islamic Jihad*, commentators and analysts have come to equate the Islamic revival with what is, in reality, a violent fringe. Organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, *Jamaat-i-Islami* in Pakistan, or the Renaissance Party in Tunisia do not seem to attract the same attention from Western commentators for all their influence in their respective countries. Books like these represent a start in the direction of redressing past neglect. Both emphatically reject notions that one Cold War between the West and communism is being replaced by another between the West and Islamic fundamentalism. Both books are recommended, and Esposito's particularly provides a survey of the Islamic world that will be of interest to general readers and specialists alike.

James Mellon

Halifax, NS