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CONTEXTUALISING NEO-ISLAMISM

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Islamism has been on an evolutionary trajectory. When Osama bin Laden and his band of devotees launched their war on the US under the banner of Islam, they epitomised a metamorphosis that had started at least two decades earlier. Bin Laden's brand stood at the extreme end of Islamism in two key areas. On the national/international and the violence/non-violence matrix, bin Laden's brand of radicalism occupied the extreme internationally violent corner. This new brand was not confined to state-demarcated objectives. Neo-Islamism, as represented by al-Qaeda and the multitude of its affiliates, is global in its strategy and tactics.[1] It is also uninhibited by any sense of common humanity, maintaining a rigidly dichotomous perception of good and evil, where anyone not affiliated with the neo-Islamists would by definition belong to the opposite camp. This binary perspective presents a series of security, social and political challenges.

This brand of neo-Islamism can pose a security threat because it does not seem to conform to the conventional differentiation between civilian and military targets. It views civilian casualties as unavoidable 'collateral damage' in its perspective on grand civilisational conflict. All those working in the Twin Towers, non-Muslims and Muslims alike, were viewed as maintaining the power of the US and the evil West. They were inconsequential in the battle between good and evil. As a result, al-Qaeda affiliates and others inspired by this Manichean view of the world have turned to soft targets in New York, Bali, Madrid and London to inflict pain and uncertainty. The objective of such attacks has been to cause maximum damage and panic. It is impossible to describe such acts as anything but criminal. It is also next to impossible to guard against them. Herein lies the enormous security challenge facing relevant authorities.

The social manifestations of this challenge are multi-faceted. Social liberties have come under threat due to increased security concerns. Whether it is intrusive screening at airports, heightened electronic surveillance, restrictions on purchase of certain chemicals or broader police powers in detaining suspected individuals, Western societies have experienced a growing challenge to individual freedoms that were taken for granted. This challenge grows with every new terrorist attack, or security scare, and has caused uproar among social libertarians who deplore the ease with which social and legal guarantees for our life style are being eroded. The group that feels this the most is the Muslim diaspora.

Europe, North America and Australia are home to substantial Muslim communities.[2] The greatest proportion of these communities moved to the 'West' in search of a better life following the devastation of World War II. These people were welcomed by recipient countries, which benefited from the bolstering of their labour force. Although Muslim social integration in host countries was not always smooth, it was overshadowed by a host of other political issues. Political violence associated with radical Islamists and the sharp turn to the right in the politics of Western liberal democracies have seriously altered the situation, giving rise to a 'Muslim question'. Fundamental questions are now being asked about the capacity of Muslims to live as active citizens in Western democracies. The current 'Muslim question' is another manifestation of the old dichotomous paradigm on Islam and modernity. Just as Islam has been derided by critics like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington as incompatible with modern forms of governance, current critics claim there to be an inherent contradiction between Muslim identity and citizenship in a liberal democracy.[3] The assumed mutual exclusivity of the two has been put on display in the debates surrounding the hijab, most notably in France where the 2004 legislation caused significant unease among Muslims and non-Muslims. The claim that adherence to Islam contradicts commitments and loyalty to the governing values of liberal democracies, and that public display of Muslim faith is an affront to principles of secularism, push Muslims in Europe, the US and Australia into a corner.

The expectation that Muslims need to reiterate their adherence to 'liberal values', be it French, Australian or British, rests on the assumption that Muslim values are at best different and at worst inimical to them. Not only is this assumption disconnected from the reality of Muslim lives, it glosses over the diversity of beliefs and practices that make up the Muslim population. It is an often overlooked fact that

Muslims are divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. They are also divided between those who consciously practice Islam and those who do not.[4] The broad-brush depiction of Muslims as a homogenous entity, paints all Muslims as religiously devout, and (almost naturally) governed by Islamic principles. This simplistic view does not allow for the vast numbers of Muslims who were simply born into a Muslim culture and treat Islam as a pillar of their identity and heritage not the source of a political ideology.

The emergence of the Muslim question in the West has added a worrying dimension to the already vexed relationship between the Muslim world and the West. The recent history of the Middle East is marked by war and bloodshed. Starting with the Arab-Israeli wars, the modern Middle East has witnessed active superpower involvement in inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Afghanistan was a proxy war *par excellence* where the US committed itself to removing the Soviet occupation via support for a range of Islamic militia groups.[5] The Iran-Iraq war was another case where the US threw its weight behind Saddam Hussein's efforts to weaken and undermine the fledgling Islamic regime. The 'War on Terror', however, has introduced a new phase in this relationship as the US now feels justified to take direct action and commit troops to theatres of war. The military operation to eradicate al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban, and the subsequent pre-emptive attack on Iraq, which brought US soldiers in the line of fire, are examples of a new stage in the international affairs of the Middle East. In this stage, the US (with or without the support of the international community) has directly intervened in the region to affect change, giving cause to greater Muslim discontent and antipathy towards Washington and its allies.[6] The complaint that Washington pursues an arrogant policy of domination, marked with double standards – immune to international scrutiny, reverberates far and wide in the Middle East.

The present volume deals with the whole gamut of the above challenges. It explores the changing nature of Islamism and its growing links with indiscriminate acts of violence as well as far-reaching implications of this development for the Muslim diaspora.

Islamism as a National Project

Islamism grew as a response to the failure of the top-down state-building project in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world.[7] The modern states of the Middle East and Asia were formally welcomed into the international fold as sovereign polities following Europe's colonial withdrawal. But the colonial past left a lasting legacy. Territorial

demarcations drawn up by colonial powers imposed the contours of modern states. This presented a pressing challenge to the legitimacy of the emerging national elites who turned to 'modernisation', whether in the guise of socialism or free market, to justify their claim to the helms of power.[8] Progress became the catch phrase of the leadership in these developing states. Except for the obvious case of Saudi Arabia, which was founded on an alliance of tribal-religious leadership, Islam was not seen as an important parcel of the modernisation drive. Perhaps revealing an intellectual affinity with the colonial powers that viewed Islam as a primitive religion, the national elites did not envisage a place for Islam in the nascent modern states. State policies ranged from active suppression of Islamic manifestations as anti-modern in Turkey and Iran, to ignoring it as irrelevant in Iraq and Jordan, to its public tolerance as politically expedient in Pakistan. The common denominator in all cases, however, was that Islam had nothing to contribute to the modern state.

Islam's exclusion at the top gave it potential for growth in direct correlation with the failure of the modern state project. To a large extent, this failure was a result of uneven socio-economic development in the new sovereign states as national plans were put in place to modernise the economy and train the labour force while retaining ownership and control over economic activities. The rate of growth in the labour force, most markedly signified in the rural-urban migrations which led to the expansion of shantytowns around capital cities, was unmatched by the growth of economic opportunities. Growing unemployment figures and static, if not falling, living standards have fed resentment and disenchantment with the promise of prosperity and modernity.[9] Poverty and unemployment continue to be nagging socio-economic ills confronting the developing world. But what made the states' failure to deliver more pronounced were the institutionalisation of public education and the growing popularity of technical and higher education among the upwardly mobile and, at the same time, the inability of the state-managed economy to absorb them or offer opportunities for their fulfillment. In the 1960s and 1970s, a gap emerged between the expanding expectations of the growing middle class, which was broadening its horizons through education, and contact with the world beyond state boundaries, and the opportunities offered by closed economic and political systems. Such unfulfilled expectations soon evolved into political discontent as the incumbent regimes continued to view their states as their personal fiefdoms and feared the aspirations of

the growingly assertive middle class as a threat to their political monopoly.

Discontent in Muslim states gained a new cultural dimension as the socio-economic and political aspirations of the middle class were complemented by the disenchantment of conservative elements of society, often led by Islamic authorities, not comfortable with the Western concepts and images that were permeating Muslim societies. This may have been an unlikely alliance, but secularly educated middle classes proved to be the most articulate and committed proponents of an Islamic critique to the incumbent regimes. Disillusionment with the top-down model of modernisation, which stifled societal initiatives, and the alienation of traditional elements of society who were affronted by what they viewed as moral corruption and 'Westernisation' proved a potent mix. Islamism has drawn from this vast pool of discontent and presented a serious challenge to the authority and legitimacy of incumbent regimes. Islamism in its conventional form, however, has been almost exclusively concerned with state affairs.[10]

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Jama'ati Islami are two obvious cases in point. The Muslim Brotherhood emerged in the early parts of the 20th century in Egypt and spread to neighbouring states with a heavy emphasis on Islamic education and welfare. The Brotherhood gradually adopted a political tone, largely in response to colonial pressures and the radicalisation of Arab opinion. The Brotherhood had a pan-Arab orientation which endorsed a united Arab front against British and French colonial powers.[11] The end of World War II, which precipitated the decolonisation in the Middle East, and the emergence of the State of Israel underlined the importance of politics for the Brotherhood. The politicisation of the organisation was accelerated by the 1952 coup which led to the presidency of the charismatic Gamal Abdul Nasser. The Brotherhood's political activism was substantiated by Sayyed Qutb who formulated the most coherent ideological position for Islamists. Qutb's rejection of man-made laws as illegitimate and his invocation of divinity to guide the Muslim community (the *umma*) have been among the most erudite expositions of the need for the merger of Islam and politics. This uncompromising Islamist doctrine made Qutb the target of state prosecution and ultimately execution in 1965. The Brotherhood, however, continued on its trajectory of political radicalism as Egypt was defeated in the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, and the subsequent peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. The assassination of Anwar Sadat by Islamists, with assumed links to the Muslim Brotherhood, was a new phase in Egyptian Islamism. Political

violence in the form of terrorist attacks on the tourist industry and other soft targets, such as secular literary and public figures or the Coptic community, has grown to become a recurring challenge in Egypt. Such acts present a serious security problem for the state. At the same time, these challenges have been limited to the state of Egypt. Whether in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood or the openly violent fringe groups such as Gama'a al-Islamiyya, Islamism in Egypt has clearly had a national agenda.

Jama'at-i Islami (the Islamic Society) in Pakistan represents another Islamist movement with explicitly nationalist horizons. Although the Jama'at was initially concerned with safeguarding and promoting the Islamic value system for the Muslim population of South Asia, like its counterpart in Egypt, it went through a process of politicisation as a result of the colonial draw-back of post-World War II. One of the significant aspects of this politicisation was the Jama'at's acquiescence to the Pakistani national project at the expense of the idealist notion of transnational *umma*. Despite earlier objections to the geographic partition of South Asia, the Jama'at embraced the new state of Pakistan after its formation and committed itself to its Islamisation.[12] Under the stewardship of Mawlana Maududi, who articulated the Islamist position on the illegitimacy of non-Shari'a-based law and gained great influence over Islamists throughout the Muslim world, the Jama'at transformed itself from a socio-political organisation concerned with the Muslim *umma* to a successful parliamentary party focused on the consolidation of Islam in Pakistan. Maududi was critical of nationalism, which he dismissed as an ideology to divide *dar ul-Islam*, yet his political activism and that of the Jama'at-i Islami were in effect restrained by the boundaries of the nation-state.

Islamism, in its violent or non-violent form, has been a national project. It has been aimed at addressing what the Islamists call 'un-Islamic behaviour' in the community by Islamising it from above. In theory, the Islamist vision is transnational. In reality, however, the Islamist zeal for capturing political power and implementing a thorough legal, social and cultural reformation has worked to lower its horizons. The notion of an Islamic state espoused by Islamists has imposed practical limitations which effectively undercut the ideal of the *umma* as a political entity. Iran and Pakistan represent two examples of the naturalisation of Islamism. In the case of Iran, especially, this process has been remarkable as the Islamic state came into being with salient implications for the international community, most immediately affecting the neighbouring states. Saudi Arabia and Iraq were targeted by the new

Islamist regime in Tehran as the next dominos to fall in the anticipated Islamic revolutions to sweep across the Middle East. Within a decade, however, the rhetoric of cascading Islamic uprisings gave way to measured pronouncements of regional security and collaboration reflecting the very tangible concerns with Iran's national interest among the top echelons of power in Tehran.[13] Iran's rapprochement with the Saudi regime in the 1990s (rejected earlier as corrupt and a barrier to true Islam), and collaboration with the US and the international community against the Taliban (2001), demonstrated the supremacy of national interests over any other idealistic agenda in Tehran's foreign policy thinking.

Hamas and Hizbullah may be added to the long list of Islamist groups that pursue an explicit national objective. Both organisations have gained a stake in the existing political establishment and are at the same time restrained by it. Their violent resistance of Israel is not aimed at awakening a global Islamic movement and the formation of an over-arching Islamic polity, although they make extensive use of the notion of Islamic solidarity and *umma* as sources of external solidarity in their local confrontations with Israel. In this sense, both organisations act within a national mental framework.

International Connection

It is important to note that the national framework of Islamists is not absolute. Islamists and non-Islamists alike have been influenced by and drawn from the international context. Military defeats in Arab-Israeli wars, for example, have left a lasting impression on the Arab public opinion, seriously undermining confidence in Arab leaders' capability and political commitment. Political discontent with incumbent regimes in the Muslim world often gains an international facet as the later are seen to be propped-up by foreign powers. The Iranian revolution was a case in point where a mass protest swelled up against the corruption of the Pahlavi regime and its US backers. The revolution was a national affair, carrying a salient international message – ie. anti-Americanism. In fact, anti-American sentiments have consistently gained a permanent spot in the rhetoric of Islamists. The reason is not difficult to fathom. The US has traditionally favoured preserving the status quo in the Muslim world, first for fear of Soviet advances and later the spread of anti-American Islamism.

Washington's policy towards the Middle East during the Cold War era was governed by its assessment of the Soviet Union as its archrival, which would take advantage of any political opening there to gain a

foothold at the expense of US national interests. Evidence of such overtures was present in the military and economic ties between Nasser's Egypt and the Soviet Union, and the growing assertiveness of the Moscow-backed Iranian Communist Party during the short lived Prime Ministership of Mohammad Mossadeq. Further afield, in Vietnam, the US suffered a blow to its image as the Communist led forces marched on Saigon. Fears of Soviet-sponsored insurgencies in South East Asia were ever-present in Washington's policymaking. These concerns were based on the logic of the Cold War, where superpower rivalry and competition were the order of the day. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, in defence of a leftist government in Kabul, set in motion a tragic and overdrawn conflict that reinforced Washington's zero-sum assessment of Cold War dynamics. As far as Washington was concerned, any move that altered the internal dynamics of states in the Middle East offered an unacceptable opportunity to the Soviet Union. Consequently, the US advanced policies that fostered stability and continuity in this oil rich region of the world. For this reason, Washington was very suspicious of political transformations, including democratic change, as demonstrated in its response to Iran under Mosaddeq (1953),[14] or the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the subsequent coup (1991). Washington was a status quo power. This translated into propping-up unpopular and repressive regimes.

The fall of the Soviet Union did not alter Washington's aversion to change, as Islamism appeared to fill the gap that the Soviet collapse had left behind. The consolidation of the Islamic regime in Iran set a precedent in the region that the US was more than keen to prevent. The US aversion towards Islamists has often resulted in tolerating grossly undemocratic practices targeted at barring Islamists from political power, or simply dismissing the outcome of the ballot boxes as illegitimate. In Egypt, for example, the authorities have systematically excluded the Muslim Brotherhood from parliamentary elections, despite public commitments to opening up the political system. Washington has remained conspicuously silent on Cairo's highly questionable electoral conduct. In the Palestinian Occupied Territories, where Hamas won an unexpected victory at the 2005 polls, the US has withdrawn its diplomatic contacts and aid, refusing to recognise the Hamas-led government, even though the electoral process was internationally endorsed (an endorsement which many other Middle Eastern polls, including the Egyptian, lacked). This pattern, of preserving closed authoritarian regimes to insulate US interests in the region, has meant

that anti-establishment Islamists are by necessity anti-American as the US is seen as the external mainstay of local despots.

Anti-American sentiments in the Muslim world, more specifically in the Middle East, were reinforced following the 2006 Israeli incursion into Lebanon to destroy Hizbullah. Much to the palpable frustration of the Lebanese government and international observers, the US refused to endorse a cease-fire plan at the United Nations (UN), giving Israel a free hand to carry out three weeks of air-raids against Lebanon's infrastructure and ground incursions in southern Lebanon. International inaction offered Israel de facto impunity. The same is true of the US. Washington acted with disdain for the international community on the eve of the 2004 invasion of Iraq. The decision to invade Iraq without the explicit sanctions of the UN Security Council was seen in the Muslim world as significant on two counts. First, the US is not accountable to international law and stands above it. Second, the international community is either too powerless to rein in US transgressions or too much under its control to oppose it. In either case, opposing the US, and the international community by extension, has grown to be a fixture of Islamist doctrine.

Widespread disenchantment with the limitations of the international system to address Muslim grievances and deliver justice has further entrenched the alienation of Islamists and given them cause to reject international agencies as illegitimate. The new brand of Islamism that has emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, often linked with the experience of jihad in Afghanistan, makes a direct connection between local and international. Unlike its predecessor, neo-Islamism is not confined within a national mindset. Instead, it regards the 'un-Islamic' behaviour of incumbent regimes in the Muslim world as a manifestation of deeper ills that operate globally. The primary target of neo-Islamists, therefore, is the international system that they view as sustaining injustice, locally and globally. Given the history of the US in the Middle East, it is not surprising that anti-Americanism is a pronounced feature of the neo-Islamist worldview.

Muslim Diaspora

It is ironic that a key aspect of modernity has brought neo-Islamism to the heart of the West. Muslim migration to Europe, America and Australia, and the subsequent natural growth of Muslim populations within these countries, has diluted the binary divide between Islam and the West. The classical division of the world between the land of Islam (*dar ul-Islam*) and the land of disbelief and war (*dar ul-harb*) has become

irrelevant as Muslims have made the West their home. By the same token, social discontent among Muslim youth in diaspora due to racial, socio-economic and/or religious discrimination has made them vulnerable to neo-Islamist propositions.

Second and third generation Muslims growing up in Western cities face difficult challenges. The choice of living in the West was not theirs to make but that of their parents – often in response to severe socio-economic or political pressures. Muslim parents see migration to the West as a way of improving the living conditions of their families and offering a better future to the next generation. The strong emphasis on education in Muslim families underlines this desire to see their offspring take advantage of opportunities and excel in their lives. It is not unusual for Muslim parents to seek fulfillment and pride through the achievements of their children. Watching career successes of the second generation makes the pain of dislocation and living away from the home country bearable for Muslim parents. Such successes also compensate in some way for the more difficult experiences of first generation Muslims in securing suitable employment. Against this backdrop of investing in the future of their offspring, while coping with the challenges of living in a socially, religiously and linguistically unfamiliar setting, Muslim migrants retain close links with their country of origin. Through travel, telephone calls to relatives and purchase of imported cultural artifacts (most notably music tapes and CDs), Muslim migrants maintain and regenerate links with their country of origin. This connection offers a degree of cultural continuity and comfort.

However, for Muslim youth in the West, links with the parents' countries of origin start to weaken due to a combination of factors, including the near absence of first-hand experience of living in the 'country of origin', decline of language proficiency in the 'mother tongue' and a sense of disconnectedness. Indeed, for the great majority of Muslim youth in the West, (the lived experiences of Muslims in France, the United Kingdom, the US and Australia, for example), makes these Western states their de facto 'home country' and the state language their 'mother tongue'. The separation of second and third generation migrants from their ancestral land is a natural process and helps them pursue their fortune in their host societies free of nostalgia. This is far from a complete emotional break. References to ancestral origins are not far below the surface, but they are kept in check with a tangible web of connections, loyalties and commitments that are generated in the course of life in the West. For those who have managed to succeed and find fulfillment, it is easy to navigate between emotional connections with

their ancestral land and social, economic, political and emotional attachment to the country of residence. For those on the margins of society, however, such navigation may prove hazardous, especially in times of crisis, such as the one we have experienced since the launch of the 'War on Terror'.

Neo-Islamism, therefore, may find a receptive audience among alienated Muslims who feel marginalised and excluded from society. Such individuals are not by necessity economically deprived. Contrary to common wisdom, there is no direct correlation between economic deprivation and political radicalism. The critical factor is the perception of injustice and bridled aspirations. For that reason, the educated middle class youth are at greater risk of radicalisation than the economically underprivileged classes. The July 2005 'home grown' terrorists in the United Kingdom, for example, had typical middle class backgrounds. Yet these individuals maintain a dim view of their chances in society and feel marginalised, even discriminated against – a perception that is often linked to the emergence of Muslim ghettos.[15] Added to this sense of alienation is a grand notion of global injustice meted out to Muslims. Here lies the attraction of neo-Islamism. Not being constrained by a national mind-frame and operating as a transnational force, it appeals to those who have lost their connection to their Muslim ancestral land but find it difficult to be accepted in their country of residence. This dual sense of alienation is often compensated for with idealised notions of Muslim unity and solidarity with global causes.

Neo-Islamism's notion of global jihad feeds on political grievances of Muslims against the global order. The unequal power relations in international affairs represented for example in global inaction in the face of Israel's incursion into Lebanon in August 2006, or growing pressures on the Muslim diaspora reflected in the 2004 French law banning hijab from schools, are noted as evidence of a global conspiracy against Islam. The response, it follows, would need to be global. By virtue of rejecting existing legal and political structures as illegitimate, neo-Islamists are inclined to engage in acts of political violence as the only remaining tool to affect change.

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This collection of essays is divided into three parts. The first part explores the broad issues of definition, and presents an analysis of the new challenges of trans-national radicalism. Neo-Islamism has operated at a global level and facilitated the rise to widespread apprehension about Islam. The growth of Islamophobic tendencies reflect at once security

concerns and fear of the unknown. Islamophobia is the reverse side of the anti-Westernism that is the common currency of Islamism. This discussion by Amin Saikal, James Piscatori and Bassam Tibi is followed by part two, which explores the relevance of Islamophobia to the internal workings of liberal democracies. The Muslim diaspora in the West has attracted significantly negative attention in the mass media and is, at times, treated as the 'fifth column'. The assumed wall that divides Muslims and non-Muslims in the West is the focus of Bryan Turner, Sue Kenny and Michael Humphrey. These authors explore how the notion of difference and the Other has affected the Muslim disapora and brought into question Muslim citizenship. The final part of this book turns to the spread and diversity of radicalism in the Muslim world as well as alternative Muslim responses to neo-Islamism. While Riaz Hassan inquires into how jihadism is understood in key Muslim societies, Greg Fealy presents an assessment of the growing challenge of jihadism in Indonesia. This exposition is followed by a sobering analysis of Sufi spiritualism in Indonesia as it represents a homegrown alternative to political radicalism. The volume is concluded by Lynne Alice's account of a democratic experiment which provides a voice to Muslim identity and sovereignty in the Balkans, a significant enterprise which challenges the neo-Islamists' global conspiracy theory.