

# DOES ISLAM POSE A THREAT TO THE WEST?

YÜKSEL SEZGIN

## INTRODUCTION

Few if any issues in international relations have generated as much myth as that of the alleged 'Islamic Threat'. Since the late 1970s, and more particularly, since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the issue of Islam and of its supposed challenge to the West has become a matter of enduring international preoccupation and one which politicians within Western European states, as well as a number of Islamic leaders, have chosen to highlight. Besides statesmen, scholars both from the West and the Muslim world have presented contradictory statements and opinions that have revolved around a highly pretentious concept, the 'clash of civilisations'. In assessing these differing opinions, we shall endeavour to establish a clear picture of the real situation – whether Islam poses an actual threat to the West beyond the fictions and stereotypes. In other words, our hypothesis, in contrast to Samuel Huntington's argument<sup>1</sup>, is that the fundamental source of conflict in this so-called New World Order is still national interest and balance of power rather than cultural or religious divisions

---

*Yüksel Sezgin is a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

1 Huntington, P. Samuel, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 22.

and it does not appear likely that this will change within a predictable future. In order to construct our thesis on concrete pillars, in the remainder, we will epitomise the confrontational and historical dimensions of the issue with specific references to some prominent sources and, before moving to a conclusion, we will provide a clear framework for the alleged Islamic threat.

§

Does Islam pose a threat to the West? Before answering this question, we should take a superficial glance at the words forming this suggestion. Initially, dealing with our volatile concepts, Andrea Lueg heeds the incompatibility of nomenclature: "...it is not Islam and Christianity that are contrasted, or the West and the East, but Islam and the West, a religion and a geographical area."<sup>2</sup> On the same argument, Bernard Lewis, a prominent scholar of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, postulates in his book, "Between these two terms, [the West] and 'Islam' there is, or there would appear to be, a certain asymmetry. The one is a geographical expression the other is a religion." And, again from Lewis, while the West or Europe resembles a notion of culture, religion, polity and civilisation, "for Muslims Islam is not merely a system of belief and worship a compartment of life. It is rather the whole of life, and its rules include civil criminal and even constitutional law."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he continues, "...the term Islam is the counterpart not only of 'Christianity' but also of 'Christendom' – not only of a religion in the narrow Western sense but of a whole civilisation which grew up under the aegis of that religion."<sup>4</sup>

In the light of this argument, it is explicit enough that in the rest of this paper, we shall refer to Islam and the West as civilisations and neither as geographical terms nor merely as religions. In the

2 Lueg Andrea, 'The Perceptions of Islam in Western Debate', in Hippler, J. and Lueg, A. (eds.), *The Next Threat* (translated by Friese, L.), Pluto Press, 1995, London, p. 21.

3 Lewis, Bernard, *Islam and the West*, OUP, 1993, Oxford, p. 4.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

## *Does Islam Pose a Threat to the West?*

post-Cold War period, there is a salient tendency to define Islam as a new threat or an enemy of the West following Soviet Communism. After the US Vice President, Dan Quayle,<sup>5</sup> and the Secretary-General of NATO, Willy Claes,<sup>6</sup> publicly identified Islam as succeeding communism as the greatest threat to Western security, the discourse of 'the clash of civilisations' gained a new momentum and became quite fashionable in Western media and literature.

Assessing the real impulses behind this Western perception of Islam, some scholars have pointed out the hypothesis of the 'necessary enemy'. In particular, Jochen Hippler and Andrea Lueg outline this approach with reasonable logic in their well-structured study:

"We no longer have the Soviet Union or Communism to serve as enemies justifying expensive and extensive military apparatus. It was in the mid-1980s at the very latest that the search began for new enemies to justify arms budgets and offensive military policies, at first as part of the Communist threat and then in its place."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to Hippler and Lueg's claim, Fred Halliday, a well-known scholar, totally refuses this approach, asserting, "Western society as a whole and Western capitalism in particular, have never 'needed' an enemy in some systemic sense."<sup>8</sup> It might be of interest to note here that as Halliday welcomes an oversimplified discourse, Hippler and Lueg's approach is more helpful to comprehend the complex dimension of the issue.

Of course, the hypothesis of the necessary enemy is not merely able to clarify the causes of the recent escalation of perceived threat. In fact, the historical deepness of the issue should be taken into

5 Esposito, L. John, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, OUP, 1992, Oxford, p. 324.

6 Spencer, Claire, 'Europe and Political Islam: Defining Threats and Evolving Policies', in Kramer, Martin, (ed.), *The Islamism Debate*, Tel Aviv University, 1997, Tel Aviv, p. 93.

7 Hippler, J. and Lueg, A. (eds.), *The Next Threat* (translated by Friese, L.), Pluto Press, 1995, London, p. 4.

8 Halliday, Fred, *Islam & the Myth of Confrontation*, I.B. Tauris, 1996, New York, p. 113.

consideration. There is a history of conflict between the world of the West, Christianity and Islam stretching back for over a millennium. From the invasions of Iberia in the seventh century, through the Crusades that began in the eleventh century and the conflicts with the Ottoman Empire, conflict has been entrenched.<sup>9</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Ottoman power declined, Britain, France and Italy established Western control over most of North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Following the end of the Second World War, relations between the imperialist West and their Islamic mandates took a more confrontational form throughout the decolonisation period and independence struggles. The artificial creation of Israel, Britain and France's invasion of Egypt in 1956, the American intervention in Lebanon in 1958, the formation of the Baghdad Pact and CENTO, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Oil crisis, the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon,<sup>11</sup> the appearance of the American navy in the Gulf, and the US bombing of Libya have contributed to the escalation of the West's and Islam's perception of mutual threat. The Middle East-originated terrorist attacks, hostage crisis and hijackings in the 1980s perpetuated this story. This warfare between Muslims and the West culminated in 1990 when the United States launched a massive operation to kick Saddam out of Kuwait. In the 1990s, again, this grave portrait was exacerbated by the bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York, the civil war between the Muslim government in Khartoum and the Christians and animists in southern Sudan, terrorist attacks by radical Muslim groups in Egypt,<sup>12</sup> the ongoing struggle between radical Islamist groups and the government in Algeria, the emergence of Islam in Central Asia, the continuing uprising of Palestinians and, recently, the victimisation of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya and Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

9 Ibid., p. 108.

10 Huntington, op. cit., p. 31.

11 Esposito, op. cit., p. 171.

12 Hadar, T. Leon, 'What Green Peril?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 2, spring 1993, p. 29.

13 Halliday, op. cit., p. 113 and Hunter, T. Shireen, 'L'ascesa dei Movimenti Islamisti e La Risposta Occidentale: Scontro di Civiltà o Scontro D'interessi?', in Guazzone, Laura (ed.), *Il Dilemma Dell'Islam*, Franco Angeli, 1995, Milano, pp. 261-63.

## *Does Islam Pose a Threat to the West?*

This is a fourteen hundred-year-old bloody history of confrontation and conflict between the Occident and the Orient. In particular, during the last few decades, Muslim and Western scholars have overwhelmingly emphasised these historical roots to justify their perceptions of the Islamic threat or the Western threat. However, it is worth recording here that what has been happening in the Muslim world since the revolution in Iran has had a salient role in terms of this recent phenomenon.

In the recent Western literature of political Islam, there have been two major schools arguing about the Islamic threat or the Western threat: neo-orientalists and neo-Third Worldists. In order to make an analysis of the Islamic threat we ought to take cognisance of these two disputing factions.

### **CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS: NEO-THIRD WORLDISTS VS. NEO-ORIENTALISTS**

The first group, neo-Third Worldists, is philosophically closer to the so-called Third Worldist tradition of Western scholarship, which flourished in the 1960s and the 1970s. These scholars have tended to see the root causes of the West's problem with Muslim countries in the West's imperial and colonial past. The other group of analysts, which could be called neo-orientalists, has attributed the behaviour of the Eastern countries – in particular, Arab and Islamic countries – to certain cultural traits and peculiarities of Islam.<sup>14</sup>

These two traditions have embraced different approaches to the current issue of the clash of civilisations or, in other words, relations between the Muslim countries and the West. Generally, while neo-orientalists emphasise the confrontational dimensions of relations between the West and Islam, the neo-Third Worldists welcome a more conciliatory line. Particularly, as the confrontational front prefers to express belligerent differences, warlike history and

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 320-321.

incompatibility of Islam with novel Western values such as modernity, democracy, secularism, human rights and so on, the conciliatory front emphasises the similarities between the two and claims that somehow a *modus vivendi* on the conditions of peaceful co-habitation can be reached between Islam and the West.

John Esposito favours calling these two approaches the 'easy path' and the 'hard path'. In his words, while the easy path views Islam and Islamic revivalism as a monolithic threat and historic enemy, the hard one moves beyond facile stereotypes and ready-made images and answers.<sup>15</sup> According to Esposito's definition, some well-known scholars such as Lewis, Huntington, Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer are champions of the easy path, whereas Shireen Hunter, Esposito himself, Hippler and Lueg are in favour of the hard path.

From the neo-orientalist front, Bernard Lewis, before the final collapse of the Soviet Union, introduced the concept of the clash of civilisations, but it did not immediately capture people's imaginations. Samuel Huntington popularised it in 1993 with an article in *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>16</sup> They see the Islamists' anti-Western leanings as the inevitable consequence of a 'clash of civilisations'.<sup>17</sup> In an article entitled 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September 1990, Lewis writes: "This is no less than a clash of civilisations – perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present and the worldwide expansion of both..."<sup>18</sup> Samuel Huntington also picks up the theme of the clash of civilisations. To him the clash of civilisations derives from the incompatibility of Islam with such fundamental Western philosophical notions as democracy and modernity.<sup>19</sup>

15 Esposito, op. cit., p. 169.

16 Hunter, T. Shireen, *The Future of Islam and the West*, Praeger, 1998, Westport, p. 5.

17 Hunter (1995), op. cit., p. 235.

18 Lewis Bernard, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3, September 1990, p. 20 (internet edition).

19 Huntington, op. cit., pp. 22-49.

*Does Islam Pose a Threat to the West?*

In contrast to those two leading figures of the neo-orientalist line, neo-Third Worldist critics accuse those who support the easy or superficial path of being culturally racist. In addressing these critics, we should consider the remarks of Lueg and Hippler on Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations':

"...However, is it that the rationale of his perceived threat is not based on an analysis of the interests or policies of countries or political powers in the Middle East, but on his contradictory formulation of 'civilising' basic categories [sic]. According to Huntington, it is not the clash of interests that leads to conflict; the simple fact is that differences between cultures engender war. In a certain sense you could call his argument 'culturally racist'. The Muslims (or Chinese) are different from us and therefore dangerous. Unlike classic racism, this difference is not genetically but culturally based...Only military solutions can promise results."<sup>20</sup>

On our part, it should be noted here that the criticisms of Lueg and Hippler somewhat exaggerate or at least overestimate what Huntington says in his article, since he also records that the clash need not necessarily be violent. However, at this point, attention should be drawn to two key words in the above-quoted passage: 'interest' and 'power'. Regarding the neo-Third Worldist theory, it might still be admitted that national interest or the international balance of power leads countries' foreign policies rather than religious or cultural impulses.

According to the neo-Third Worldist school, contrary to Huntington's suggestion, the real cause of conflict between Islam and the West is not civilisational incompatibility. If this were the case, relations between the Western countries and all Muslim states would be hostile,<sup>21</sup> which is not the case. For example, the United

<sup>20</sup> Hippler, J. and Lueg, A., op. cit., pp. 155-160.

<sup>21</sup> Hunter (1998), op. cit., p. 19.

States led and financed the most militant and successful Islamic fundamentalist offensive; the one against the Moscow-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it was surprising that the secular West defended fundamentalist Saudi Arabia against secular Iraq. As we have witnessed, as far as the Middle East and the Gulf in particular is concerned, it is not religion that matters so much as power and strategic interests. The West only fears the Islamic threat in a religious context, when certain concrete interests are threatened.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude this section, some notable points may be worth repeating here, as Hunter quoted Graham Fuller wrote, "A civilisational clash is not so much over Jesus Christ, Confucius, or the Prophet Muhammad as it is over the unequal distribution of world power, wealth, and influence."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is a conflict between those who have power and those who do not, those who control the world's destiny and those who are the subjects of control. In short, the determining factor in defining the threat to Western interests and in deciding the West's response has not been the secular or religious dimension of political movements in the Arab and Muslim countries, but rather their propensity to challenge the existing regional and international order, based on Western supremacy.<sup>25</sup>

### ISLAMIC THREAT?

In this section, we shall endeavour to establish whether there is merely a perceived or real Islamic threat to Western interests, basing our arguments on the claims of both the neo-orientalists and neo-Third Worldists. These perceived or real threats will be analysed below:

---

22 Hadar, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

23 Hippler, Jochen, 'The Islamic Threat and Western Foreign Policy', in Hippler, J. and Lueg, A. (1995), *op. cit.*, pp. 122-145.

24 Hunter (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

25 Hunter (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 249.



## **Political, Economic and Military Threat**

Referring to terms such as the 'crescent of crisis' and 'global *Intifada*', neo-orientalists assert that the entire Muslim world, rich with oil, encompassing a billion people and potentially armed with nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, could become a formidable contender for power and a threat to Western interests. But as a response to these overestimated claims, neo-Third Worldists postulate that, despite the perceived monolithic view of Islam, in reality, territorial disputes have divided the Muslim world along ethnic, sectarian, ideological lines.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, today there cannot be a great 'Islamic challenge', not only because the Islamic states are and will remain much weaker than those of the West, but also because they do not represent a coherent, internationally constituted alliance.<sup>27</sup>

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the greatest concern of the Western countries has been Iran's effort to export its revolution to other parts of the Muslim world, in particular, the mainly Shi'ite-populated countries of the Middle East and the Gulf.<sup>28</sup> As an instrument of its policy of exporting its radical ideology, Iran has become the most active state sponsor of international terrorism along with Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan. In this sense, as long as they persist in resorting to violence and terrorism, they will continue to pose a serious threat to Western interests all over the world.

Militant organisations represent a small group in the Islamic movement. Particularly, in the 1990s, Islamic movements ceased to be restricted to small, marginal organisations on the periphery of society and instead became part of mainstream Muslim society and an accustomed part of the legal political process in many Muslim countries.<sup>29</sup> Hence, as a new phenomenon in some Muslim countries

---

26 Hunter (1995), op. cit., pp. 253-57.

27 Halliday, op. cit., pp. 117-119.

28 Roy, Oliver, *The Failure of Political Islam* (translated by Volk, C.), I.B. Tauris, 1994, London, p. 107.

29 Sezgin, Yüksel, 'Political Protest in an Islamic Language', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January-March 2000, pp. 149-150.

that have relatively open, liberal systems and elections, the rise of fundamentalist movements through legitimate electoral successes has occurred. The strongest Islamic groups in the Middle East today are not Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, which can kill and terrorise but are unlikely to be able to seize power and rule. Rather, the most formidable Islamic forces are, in fact, groups like the FIS and the Muslim Brotherhood, which espouse democratic principles in theory. And, some of them have willingly participated (most with impressive success) in elections,<sup>30</sup> formed alliances with secular groups and held cabinet positions.<sup>31</sup> According to Esposito, this manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1990s poses a new challenge to the West rather than a threat.<sup>32</sup> However, Hunter does not agree with Esposito and she postulates that the coming power of Islamist movements could pose an economic threat to Western interests by reducing Western access to Muslim markets and by affecting the supply and price of oil.<sup>33</sup>

In talking about any future Islamic extortion based on oil or its use as an economic and strategic weapon against the West, neo-Third Worldists claim that, should Islamists come to power, they would also be faced with the same economic and technological shortcomings and needs that face current governments. For example, throughout the 1980s, Iran never interfered with the free flow of oil. In fact, even the Islamists could not be oblivious to market forces shaping the price of oil. In sum, it might be worth noting here that Middle Eastern oil producers, no matter what their political orientation, will always need to sell oil.<sup>34</sup>

Lastly, with regard to the military potential of the Muslim world, as well as Iran, the non-Islamic but radical and anti-Westernist governments of the Middle East, such as Iraq, Syria and Libya, are

30 Miller, Judith, 'The Challenge of Radical Islam', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 2, Spring 1993, p. 47.

31 Hadar, op. cit., p. 36.

32 Esposito, op. cit., pp. 206-207.

33 Hunter (1995), op. cit., p. 259.

34 Miller, op. cit., p. 55.

## *Does Islam Pose a Threat to the West?*

also said to have weapons of mass destruction or at least to have such programmes, developed with Russian and Chinese technical assistance and know-how. However, again, the neo-Third Worldist school avows that the threat of an emerging pan-Islamist bloc, possibly armed with nuclear weapons, has also been highly exaggerated. Further, it is very unlikely that any Muslim state will put a nuclear capability at the service of pan-Islamic goals. Also, the impulse to develop nuclear weapons derives mainly from security concerns or national ambitions rather than from their Islamic or secular character. Moreover, the economic, technological and political constraints that so far have prevented some countries from gaining nuclear weapons will continue to exist and could become even stronger in the case of Islamist-dominated governments. Lastly, characterising any Muslim country's nuclear capabilities, as the prospect of an 'Islamic bomb' is as absurd as, say, characterising the US nuclear capability as the 'Christian bomb' or Israel's nuclear power as the 'Jewish bomb'.<sup>35</sup>

### **Demographic and Ethical Threat**

The migration of people from Middle Eastern countries, mainly to Western Europe, has made a major contribution to the recent escalation of the perceived Islamic threat. These migratory waves have created serious economic, moral and political problems for a number of Western countries, especially France and Germany, at a time of high unemployment. In this sense, as a next threat, the coming to power of Islamist movements in a number of key Muslim states, such as Algeria, Egypt and other Arab countries, would almost certainly lead to a wave of migration to the West, as happened with the Iranian Revolution.

Muslims living in Western countries, like Germany and France, also present an ethical threat for Western civilisation beyond the visible concrete threats mentioned above. Perhaps this recent threat is the most salient one to the West in terms of its implications for Western culture and civilisation. For instance, in France and

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-344.

Germany, the controversy over whether Muslim school-girls should be allowed to wear Islamic headdress has illustrated a major ethical dilemma for the West. In fact, this threat has forced the West to examine its own basic values such as religious tolerance, freedom of expression, human rights and even democracy and plurality. Esposito reflects this dilemma:

“Whether or not they will adapt to our liberal agenda is indeed an important question and cannot be dismissed. But one can also ask: will we adapt our own liberalism? ...when we ask what kind of democrats they are, we must be prepared also to ask and answer what kind of democrats are we?”<sup>36</sup>

### **Socio-cultural and Ideological Threat**

Due to the Euro-centric characteristic of modernism, many scholars have used ‘Westernisation’ as a synonym for ‘modernism’. Hence, when Islamist fundamentalists have emphasised their anti-Westernism, neo-orientalist groups have labelled Islam ‘anti-modernist’. In this sense, Western commentators see a basic conflict between, on the one hand, the Islamists’ goal of creating societies and governments ruled by Islamic law and morality and, on the other, the novel Western model and the goal of spreading democracy and human rights.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is said that Islam poses an inherent threat to the West and its system of values.

Indeed, the issue of whether Islam is compatible with democracy is a subject on which Western opinion is deeply divided. Broadly speaking, to neo-orientalists, Islam and Western democracy are incompatible.<sup>38</sup> If we are supposed to epitomise this case we might be referring to an interesting example that is quoted by Hunter:

---

<sup>36</sup> Esposito, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>37</sup> Hunter (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>38</sup> Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

*Does Islam Pose a Threat to the West?*

“...according to Amos Perlmutter: ...the issue is not democracy but the true nature of Islam. Is Islam, fundamental or otherwise, compatible with liberal, human rights oriented Western-style representative democracy? The answer is an emphatic ‘No’.”<sup>39</sup>

On the contrary, the neo-Third Worldists believe that it is possible to develop an Islamic version of democracy. However, those Western analysts who see an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democracy tend to define the latter as meaning a secular system of government with complete separation of religion and state. Defined in this sense, democracy is indeed incompatible with Islam, according to which, at least in theory, there is no separation of religion and politics, sovereignty belongs to God, and the Koran and the Shari’ah are the only sources of law.

Again, according to neo-Third Worldists, Islam has already developed a certain degree of democracy as an integral part of modern Islamic political thought. In talking about the lack of enthusiasm or support for political liberalisation, they assert that the political realities of the Muslim world have not been conducive to the development of democratic traditions and institutions. Weak economies, illiteracy and high unemployment, especially among the younger generation, exacerbate the situation, undermining confidence in secular governments and increasing the appeal of ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’.

Finally, speaking of human rights, plurality and egalitarianism in Islamic society, both neo-orientalists and neo-Third Worldists argue that due to the lack of democracy and secular thought, it is very hard to claim that Islamic society is respectful of universal human rights. Insofar as the status of non-Muslims, women and freedom of speech is concerned, previous and current examples of political Islam or poorly democratised Muslim governments have had unsatisfactory records.

---

<sup>39</sup> Hunter (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 246.

**CONCLUSION**

Eventually, we shall arrive at the following conclusion based on what we have presented so far: as the neo-Third Worldist school alleges, neither the West nor the Muslim countries (even the most radical, like Iran and Saudi Arabia) base their policies on religious priorities. At this point, the example of American military bases in the Gulf should be brought in mind. Also, American and most other Western policymakers do not subscribe (and never have) to the simplistic view of the Islamist wave as a monolithic force engaged in a life-or-death struggle with the West. This truth was embodied in a historic statement of US State Department in June 1992: "...the United States Government does not view Islam as the next 'ism' confronting the West or threatening world peace."<sup>40</sup>

However, this is not to say that Islamic governments (however defined, whether popularly elected or formed by military juntas or clerical cadres), the growing presence of Muslims in the West and terrorist groups do not pose any threat or raise any domestic or security issues for Western countries.

Finally, when talking about recent parochial, ethnic, religious or sectarian conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, Bosnia and Kosovo, it should be noted that to perceive these conflicts as a 'clash of civilisations' would be an unreliable observation. This is because socio-cultural and religious factors have only a secondary-fostering role behind the primary political and geo-strategic factors. Generally, they are nothing more than a spark in a politically escalated environment.

---

<sup>40</sup> Hunter (1995), op.cit., p.236.