DOCUMENTI
IAI

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ISLAMISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB WORLD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

by Laura Guazzone

IAI9230   **ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI**

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ISLAMISM
IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB WORLD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

by Laura Guazzone

§ 1 The 'Islamic threat' in Western security discourse

The denunciation of 'new threats' arising in the regions lying to the south of the European landmass began after the 1978 Iranian revolution and has, since the early eighties, become a stable item on the Western security agenda.

In the meantime, the international security environment has changed drastically and this has brought about a consequent change in the strategic significance of the Mediterranean region. But the repeated involvement of Western forces in regional conflicts in this area--from the 1982 multinational force in Lebanon to the 1991 Gulf war--has kept perceptions of 'a threat from the South' alive, in spite of all the changes, and has made them gain increasing prominence in Western security discourse.

As a result, there is a widespread perception of 'a threat from the South', possibly not as lethal as the one that has just vanished in the East, but more difficult to counter because of its diffuse and unpredictable nature. This perception is supported by frequent references to three important factors characterizing the political environment of the regions lying south of Western Europe: arms proliferation, political instability, and Islamism.

While arms proliferation and political instability are the subject of indepth analyses and specific policy actions, the political significance of fundamentalist Islam is rarely analyzed outside specialist circles. As a consequence, it is often acritically assumed that Islamism, the political arm of fundamentalist Islam, is a single, negative force confronting the West from Morocco to Indonesia.

It is not uncommon that in Western security discourse Islam as a whole is considered as antagonistic to the West. In fact, Islam has many forms, including moderate and conservative elements which are very strong, well connected to the West and firmly integrated in the international community.

Therefore, it is essential to clarify that the cause of Western security concerns is Islamism, which is only one of the many facets of a complex religious, cultural and political reality named Islam. Going beyond basic definitions, it remains to be seen whether and why Islamism is a risk for Western security.

The fear that Islamism is a security risk for the West seems to stem from cultural as well as political considerations. Culturally, Islamism is considered as totally foreign to Western heritage and inherently hostile to it. Politically, it is feared that Islamism will fuel endless instability in the regions concerned and foster local regimes that will inevitably antagonize the West.

These perceptions are not groundless, but have to be qualified. This is why this paper aims to provide a deeper conceptual understanding of the Islamist phenomenon, with special reference to the Arab World.

§ 2. A unique phenomenon?

It is widely believed that Islamism is a unique and historically unprecedented phenomenon, lacking any cultural ties with developments in the rest of the world. But this conviction is false and contributes in no small measure to the negative assessment of the phenomenon.

When the revival of Islam came to the attention of the West at the end of the seventies, the political movements involved were defined as 'fundamentalist' in English and 'intégristes' in French. But both terms--fundamentalist and intégriste--had actually been coined at the end of the nineteenth century to describe Christian movements: the former, the Evangelical Protestant movements in the United States; the latter, Catholic movements in southern Europe.

Like these Christian movements, which still exist today, the present Islamic resurgence rejects the relationship between religion and society that characterizes modern society (i.e. the separation of state and religion), and like the Christian fundamentalist movements, it considers the Scriptures the only source of religious authenticity and legitimacy.

Thus, fundamentalist schools of thought have also arisen in the Muslim world. But while some give priority to ethical-moral reconversion, others concentrate on politics as their main field of action.[1] Only the latter, technically defined as 'Islamist', have a direct impact on domestic and international politics.

The important point here is that the historical and cultural process of which Islamism is an expression, that is, religious rebirth in the face of the crisis of modernity, is not exclusive to the Muslim world, even though it takes on specific characteristics there.

On the contrary, the conflict between the universal values of modernity, which came to light in Europe during the French Revolution and then spread to the rest of the world, and the particular values of local cultures (authenticity) is one of the main quandaries of the contemporary world. The reemergence throughout the world of ethnic and racial biases and of regionalism and protectionism is the most evident political symptom of the global dimension and centrality of the problem.

Returning specifically to the subject at hand, a number of examples can be found of the universality of this rebirth of religion in the face of the crisis of modern positivism: the Theology of Liberation in Asia and Latin America, the charismatic movements in Western Europe and North America, and the religious dissent of the Eastern European populations and the ultra-orthodox Jews.

Thus, Islamism is not a unique and isolated phenomenon, either historically or culturally. It does have specific characteristics, though, which distinguish it from other similar movements. The first and most important stems from the specificity of the historical and cultural conditions of access to modernity in the Arab-Muslim world. The second, directly related to the first, is the different political impact of the phenomenon: there can be no doubt that the Islamist movements influence the political processes in the Muslim countries much more pervasively than do other similar movements in other parts of the world.

---

[1] See Bruno Etienne, L'islamisme radical, Paris: Editions Hachette, 1987.

The penetration of Western modernity into the Muslim world via colonialism generated a cultural reaction which may be defined as "selective absorption". While the material techniques of modernity (in the scientific, military and organizational fields) were often assimilated with acritical enthusiasm, the cultural and ethical substrata of modernity (human rights, liberalism, secularization) were either not comprehended or were explicitly rejected.

In explaining the current political success of Islamist movements, reference is often made to the doctrine of the non-separation of religion and state, in the presumption that this tenet is specific to Islam. But actually, all religions propose such an all-encompassing scheme. Therefore, the use of such an argument amounts to the adoption of the rhetoric of these movements.

The real reason why Islamist movements can successfully pursue theocratic political designs today is that the process of cultural modernization--in the deepest sense of overcoming the holistic conceptions of pre-modern societies--has been conflictual and partial.

§ 3. Interpreting the Political Role of Islamism in the Arab World

Various 'schools of thought' concerning the historical, political and cultural functions of Islamism can now be distinguished in the abundant literature of global and sectorial studies that has proliferated since the Iranian revolution.

The analyses carried out by these schools (which, of course, do not define themselves as such, but which emerge from the similarities in the interpretations of individual scholars) agree on numerous aspects, but differ on the primary historical function of the Islamist phenomenon.

The function of political relegitimation. According to one interpretation, the primary function of Islamism is to provide a response and an alternative to the crisis in political legitimacy of the regimes in power in the Arab-Islamic world and the crisis of the ideologies backing them (Arab nationalism, Arab socialism).[2]

The most interesting aspect of this interpretation is the analysis made of the nature of the political conflict under way in the countries affected by strong Islamist movements and of its possible outcomes.

The conflict is seen as being between the middle class involved in the regime (party officials and cadres, businessmen benefitting from public procurements, etc.) and the lower middle class (middle and lower ranks, smaller businessmen, etc), in other words, between the state and 'civilian society'. The instrument of the conflict is rivalry about respective religious legitimacy and the mobilization of popular consensus on that basis; the object of the conflict is the maintenance of the status quo (and power) for the state middle class, and change and access to power for the lower middle class.

The important political implication of this analysis is that, given the nature of the socio-political conflict provoked by the Islamist protest, its outcome may not be in contrast with the creation of a

---

[2] The first to adopt the thesis of the crisis of legitimacy as an explanation for the political instability in the Arab world was Michael Hudson in *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

liberal political system.

As emphasized by Binder, in this perspective the question is

> Whether the Islamic resurgence will foster or hinder the emergence of the bourgeois state in the Middle East (...which) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the achievement of a liberal, pluralist, democratic, participatory, and competitive regime. [3]

In the political arena of the Arab World the question is reflected in the coexistence of two types of Islamist movements: those who advocate revolutionary methods to seize power and 're-islamize' the State and the society, and those who adopt a reformist way to the same end.

At the regional level, the dichotomy is represented on the one hand by the Iranian and Sudanese examples, were an Islamic state was achieved through mass revolution and a military coup d'etat respectively, and the electoral way undertaken in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan on the other.

The analysis of present situation of the Arab countries demonstrates that the revolutionary wing is by far minoritarian in the whole movement. According to the class analysis developed by this 'school' of thought, this is not the result of a conjunctural situation that may be easily reversed, but of the structural group interests of the Islamist movement, that aims at a larger share of power within the existing nation-state.

The function of cultural reconciliation. A second school of thought, which some define as "neo-orientalist", believes that the main function of the Islamist movement is to reconcile the two conflicting influences of modernity and authenticity mentioned earlier (§2).

Those holding this view believe that Islamism could play a historic-cultural role similar to the one enacted by Protestant Puritanism in the West, where, according to Weber's well-known interpretation, secularization has resulted from religious fundamentalism.[4]

The most immediate political implication of this interpretation is that the introduction of Islamism into the political process could, in the long run, lead to the completion of the process of cultural modernization left unfinished during the colonial and nationalist periods.

Such a hypothesis would seem paradoxical, if it were not for the fact that Islamism is the offspring of the modernity that it rejects: proof is the number of technically/scientifically qualified technicians among the activists of Islamism and the role played by universities, not only mosques, in disseminating it.[5] Thus, as Etienne puts it, it may be that

> La réponse à la modernisation allogène consiste donc finalement à retourner la nationalisation du progrès en islamisant la modernité.[6]

---

[3] Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 18.

[4] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Scribner's, 1952. This interpretation has been applied to Islamism by, among others, Wilhelm Freund in "Judischer and islamischer Fundamentalismus: Entsprechungen, politische Konsequenzen", *Der Orient*, vol. 28, n.2.

[5] See Gilles Kepel, Yann Richard, *Intellectuels et militants de l'Islam contémporain*, Paris: Seuil, 1990.

[6] Bruno Etienne, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

An important symptom of this is the emphasis laid by Islamic movements on participatory democracy, both in ideological debate and in political practice. Although a very controversial measure, political parties have been formed and have participated in the electoral process wherever this has been possible (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan). The justified suspicion that adoption of democratic practice is no more than a political tactic does not detract from the fact that the Islamic protest may be integrating into the popular culture of the Arab countries the fundamental elements of political modernity, which have, until now, been expounded only by marginal elites.

§ 4. Implications for the West

The foregoing has some important implications for the evaluation of the political significance of the Islamist phenomenon since it argues that Islamism is not a totally negative and disruptive phenomenon for the countries concerned. Under certain conditions, namely if it gains power through regular elections, Islamism may contribute to bring about more legitimate and stable regimes. A development that would certainly be in Western interest.

As for the crucial question of what would be the international behavior of an Islamist state, namely its attitude towards the West, a number of factors have to be considered before any answer can be attempted.

First of all, the views regarding relations with the West differ greatly among the various Islamist movements and from country to country. Secondly, no matter how strong its anti-Western rhetoric, in the long run internal factors and international interdependence would force any Islamist regime to strike some kind of compromise with the West.

Finally, the guiding principles of any Islamist state would not be different from those of any other existing Islamic state, like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

Actually, the perception of threat related to Islamism has little to do with its specific essence and is strongly influenced by the case of Iran. As a result, Islamism is ascribed kinds of behaviour, above all in international relations, that do not derive from the specific characteristics of this politico-cultural phenomenon, but are typical of more general phenomena such as nationalism and Third World radicalism.

Indeed these types of international orientation involve patterns of behavior that are antagonistic to Western interests. In the economic field they involve planned and protectionist economies, in the security field they advocate strong postures to defend independence and confront 'imperialistic penetrations'.

In the Arab World radical nationalism and antimperialism have been until now the tenets of secular regimes. However, the Iranian case demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, a radical foreign policy can be married to Islamism as well.

Together with other factors, strong Western interference in local politics and a global attitude of suspicion towards Islam may contribute to the radicalization of the foreign policy of Islamists regimes.

The relationship between the West and the Arab-Muslim world is a dynamic one, in which the behaviour of one side immediately reflects and causes reactions in that of the other.

A Western policy of wariness or, worse, confrontation towards Islamism would strengthen radicals and affect the moderate factions that represent a potential for the kind of political development and international stabilization that would certainly be in the interests of the West. Such a policy could antagonize the entire Muslim world, of which Islamism is only one of the many facets, and create problems with respect to the Muslim communities in North America and Western Europe.

Although more difficult to pursue, a policy of dialogue in the framework of cultural tolerance and politico-economic integration is the only rational choice, even in the field of security.

Conclusions

Since the Iranian revolution, the Western allies have perceived a new "threat from the South" and often assumed that Islam is part of this threat. However, the cause of Western concerns should be Islamism, the political arm of Islamic fundamentalism, and not Islam as a whole.

The fear that Islamism is a security risk for the West stems from cultural as well as political considerations. Islamism is considered as totally foreign to Western culture and inherently hostile to it. Politically, it is feared that Islamism will fuel endless instability in the regions concerned and foster local regimes that will inevitably antagonize the West. These perceptions are not groundless, but have to be qualified.

This paper has argued that the cultural estrangement of Islamism from Western culture is a misperception: in fact the historical and cultural process of which Islamism is an expression, that is, religious rebirth in the face of the crisis of modernity, is not exclusive to the Muslim world, even though it takes on specific characteristics there.

On the contrary, the conflict between the universal values of modernity, which came to light in Europe during the French Revolution and then spread to the rest of the world, and the particular values of local cultures (authenticity) is one of the main quandaries of the contemporary world.

As for the concern that Islamism could be the cause of endemic political instability in the countries concerned, socio-political analyses argue to the contrary. Under certain conditions, namely if it gains power through regular elections, Islamism may bring about a new political legitimacy and contribute to the consolidation of liberal, democratic regimes until now non-existent in the Arab World.

Finally, the fear that the regimes eventually brought about by Islamism will have an international behavior inevitably antagonistic to the West stems from the fact that, elaborating on the case of Iran, Islamism is ascribed kinds of behaviour in international relations that do not derive from its specific characteristics, but are typical of more general phenomena such as nationalism and Third World radicalism.

Although difficult to pursue, a Western policy of dialogue in the framework of cultural tolerance and politico-economic integration could contribute significantly to prevent the radicalization of the foreign policy of Islamists regimes.