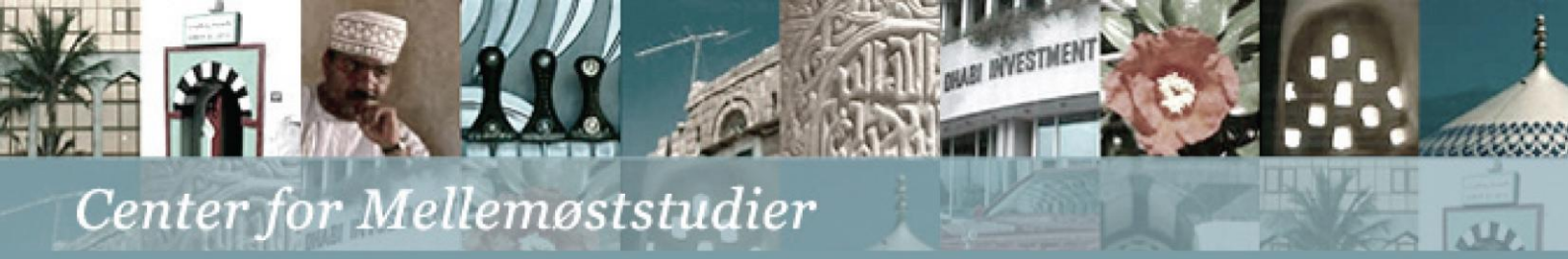

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Islam in World Affairs post-9/11: Three Responses

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The events of 9/11 continue to resound in scholarly debates about Islam and the future of Muslim societies. This review article discusses three studies that attempt to make sense of recent developments at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East. While these studies provide important insights into Middle Eastern history and politics, they fall short of offering convincing interpretations of Islamic politics in contemporary world affairs.

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It may be possible to speak of three types of responses to Islam in world affairs in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, if one is to leave out the discourse of the clash of civilizations. I aim to focus in this piece on three separate studies which were apparently conducted and published as the debate on the meaning and role of Islam following the events was in full swing. The first type in these responses, exemplified here by that of Amin Saikal, emphasizes the common heritage and historical exchange between the assumed categories of Islam and the West, repudiating the idea of an insurmountable gap. The second response, that of Naveed Sheikh, views the resurgent political Islam as a product of the ongoing interaction between the Muslim world and the West, dominated by the age-old power politics of the latter, in turn rehearsing ideas for a possible pan-Islamic foreign policy that might counter this hegemony. Islamist activism, notably excluded in the discussion by Sheikh, is placed in a historical context in the third type of response formed by Sami Zubaida's study of *shari'a*, the idea of a transcendental and historically unassailable vision of Islamic law and justice, a catchword of the Islamist vision of politics.

Islam and the West

This much-discussed Manichean distinction, which gained sudden ascendancy following 9/11, significantly underwrites both the classical orientalist approaches to Islam and the less known 'occidentalism' developed by Muslim ideologues in the last century. Interestingly, the apologetic discourse advanced by Muslim intellectuals in the wake of September 11 has continued this inaccurate and, further, alarmingly perilous binary which is oblivious to practical as well as formal evidence in its monolithic understanding of both 'Islam' and the 'West'. Urging cooperation between the terms of the binary, as opposed to acknowledging an irreducible conflict based on an inherent irreconcilability, Amin Saikal refutes in his book *Islam and the West* the common premise of orientalist and occidentalist vistas in the matter.[1] Nevertheless the study remains self-defeating on the whole for maintaining the assumed dichotomy which homogenizes Islam and the West in essentially distinct realms.

Islam as a happy constant is endorsed in the volume in the face of various divisive forces which in effect characterize Islam and Muslims on both domestic and international levels. The result is Islam, or 'the domain of Islam', a term

employed in the study throughout, as an uncomplicated, transcendental signified in world affairs. Islam is understood, at once, as a policy element in intergovernmental association *and* as a transnational force, as a legitimizing tool in domestic politics *and* as a source of civic identity. Islam as a wholesale referent along these lines is, simultaneously, Islam in history *and* the present-day Islam, and, perhaps more formidably, Islam as the formal, scriptural frame of reference *and* Islam in its multifarious, often contrasting, interpretations. The disharmony which clearly marks the conceptualizations of Islam to a significant extent, and which is arguably at the heart of the ongoing debate, is therefore largely ignored in the study in favour of a monolithic idea of Islam, one which is sufficiently autonomous and self-contained as an 'identity' concept, standing apart from an equally metaphysically constructed notion of the 'West' in terms cultural, political and historical.

Presuming a duality of Islam and the West in contemporary world politics, the volume seeks to counter the Western mindset, formed rapidly in the aftermath of the events of September 11, that a clash between the two is presently what is at play. The stage is set for the argument in the opening chapter by a discussion of the terrorist attacks and the intellectual and policy responses to the events, particularly in the United States, with global implications. The following chapter is devoted to an analysis of the tension from a historical perspective, which offers an overview of the interaction between Muslims and Judeo-Christian communities in history, emphasizing the pattern of long-standing peaceful coexistence, notably facilitated by the common origin and precepts of the respective faiths. The discussion appears to be somewhat anachronistic in its treatment of the historical experience between Muslims and non-Muslims living under Islam (the *dhimma*). The interaction is described through exclusively Eurocentric notions, such as minority rights, principally 'the right of freedom of religion for Jews and Christians' under Muslim rule, in what is today the Middle East, from the 8th century onwards (p. 30). In truth, the concept was alien not only to the pre-colonial Islamic setting, but also to the very European discourse on tolerance prior to the Enlightenment. Another evident anachronism in the chapter is a rather forced effort on the part of the author to render more palatable, under the prevailing parameters, historical notions held suspect in the ongoing debate, such as *jihad*, interpreted as 'a conceptually defensive act' (p. 27).

The chapter also discusses, as part of the historical experience, Western colonialism, which prompted the resurgence of Islam as an anti-imperialistic ideology in the 19th century. Islamism as an ideology would in turn exert considerable influence in the independence and early post-colonial life of the bulk of

Muslim nations, only to be subdued by the rising secularism, spearheaded by Turkey. The next three chapters in the book seek answers to the question posed at the end of this chapter: 'what happened that generated the necessary conditions to give rise to Islamism' (p. 41), especially its extremist versions, following the apparent triumph of secularism? The answers rehearsed in the study are: (1) the United States hegemonic behaviour in the Middle East as part of its Cold-War policy of containment, which involved the support of the authoritarian regimes in the region and consequently the alienation of large masses from democratic governance, (2) the unprincipled and biased US interference in regional issues, such as the Iranian revolution, the Palestinian problem, and the Afghan conflict, with mostly catastrophic consequences that left Muslims by and large embittered, and finally (3) the inability of internal political dynamics in most Muslim countries to incorporate a sound, Western-type reconciliation of sate and society to occasion administrations sufficiently accountable, and responsive to needs and demands, on the domestic front.

The closing chapter in the study is a perceptive critique of the US and its allies in the continuing all-out war on terrorism, pursued, as the author argues, mostly on a haphazard basis, and hardly mindful of the sources, as opposed to the alleged supporters, of extremism. According to the author, far from having learned from its past mistakes, the US has returned to the region with a vengeance, 'show[ing] more willingness than ever to add more dictators to its list of allies' (p. 137), and with little care or patience for a natural process of democratization in regional states. One important merit of this volume in this regard is the strong emphasis it places on the Khatami Iran as a genuine exercise towards a home-grown, working democracy, which, the author contends, may form a model for the rest of the Muslim landscape.

Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy

The New Politics of Islam by Naveed S. Sheikh is a short, yet ambitious, study which departs to a large extent from the bulk of the literature of its type, produced in abundance in the aftermath of the events of September 11, by refusing to take seriously the prevailing discourse on the so-called Islamic threat to the world order, and by being unapologetic.[2] Through mostly tacit assumptions, the work treats the resurgent Islam in global affairs, including the forces that propelled de-secularization in Iran, as part and parcel of the mostly justifiable yearnings in the Muslim world, on both domestic and transnational levels, for what may be conceived as merely peripheral forms of modernity, as distinct

from the Western mainstream. This is clearly in contrast with the established view of political Islam as an unheeding abnormality or anachronism in defiance of modernity as such. The terrorism associated with Islam, the bread and butter of much of the recent thematization in the matter, is accorded in this context only passing mentions as aberrations of at most a 'post-religious' mould not necessarily relevant to the study of Islam in world politics.

Instead, the volume focuses on what it terms the 'inter-Islamic cold war' (p. 138), which has defined Islamic internationalism in its post-colonial configuration, as reflected, first and foremost, in the advent, logic and functioning of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The book is divided into three main parts. The first part, 'Pan-Islamic paradigms', is on the theory of Islamic internationalism in the period following the demise of the caliphal dominion. The discussion contrasts the political union of believers, beyond national divisions, and with an undisputed central authority, the caliphate, as articulated in the classical theory of pan-Islam, with the internationalism espoused in the contemporary inter-governmental discourse on pan-Islamism. The latter, culminating in the OIC, appears to be fully committed to the Westphalian order and its dictates. The pan-Islamism of the OIC is therefore confined to economic, social, cultural and scientific cooperation, as stipulated in its Charter, conspicuously shy of emulating the political aspirations in the classical theory. Further, the OIC appears to have come about through concerns unique to the modern territorial state, fully in line with foreign-policy behaviour as predicted in conventional assessments of inter-state politics.

This theme of intra-Islamic power politics as the underlying reason for the existence of the OIC forms the subject of analysis in the following part of the study, 'A geopolitical genealogy of the OIC'. The discussion offers an evaluation of the OIC via the actions, designs and initiatives of three of its key members, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan, indicating that interest over identity is clearly the overarching principle in the practice of the OIC. That the OIC is a forum for both overt and concealed power politics, devoid of common purpose or action beyond the individual and utilitarian pursuits of its members, is hardly a novel insight. The fact that the largest part in the study is devoted to the exploration of this theme, therefore, undermines the originality of the work. The third and final part in the volume, 'Self-identity in foreign policy', is partly an effort to compensate for this, where the author re-introduces the question of identity as a likely ingredient in foreign-policy making. This twist, which affords some emphasis on identity, aims to distance the analysis from the mainstream realist conception premised solely on interest. Yet, at the same time, the author takes issue with what he terms the 'geo-culturalism' of writers such as

Samuel Huntington, which, the author contends, essentializes identity and amounts to an uninformed and uninspired cultural determinism.

It remains dubious, however, that the point the study makes on the influence of identity in policy preference bestows upon the work the inventiveness and unorthodoxy it seeks. According to the author, religious identity can be an enabling input in discursive formations pertaining to foreign policy. Its function in this regard is that of ideology, as spelled out in numerous textbooks of political theory: identity can be a constitutive force, as opposed to a mere false consciousness, insofar as references to identity may lend support for both the articulation and legitimization of policies formed through interest.

Recourse to the well-trodden, at the cost of freshness, appears to be characteristic in this work through a number of its themes. For instance, it conceives the Peace of Westphalia as the onset of a clear demarcation between religion and international politics (p. 15), an assumption rather oblivious to the life and fortunes of the concept of *Respublica Christiana* in Europe well into the nineteenth century. Similarly, the author seems happily to embrace the distinction between God and Caesar, which he thinks epitomizes secular Western politics (p. 23), heedless of the body of work (notably that of Talal Asad) that has found problems, to say the least, with this presupposition of a clear-cut distinction between tradition and political modernization in the historical development of Western modernity. Last but not least, the author reiterates the trite notion of the Machiavellian amorality premised on a purportedly clear separation of ethics and politics (p. 23), a widely circulated reading of Machiavelli, again, increasingly questioned in recent theory. The study gets interesting and original in the closing pages as it ponders upon the modern and the traditional in the context of Islam, reflecting on postmodern pan-Islamism. This discussion is, alas, cut short.

Islamic Law

Hybridity, as opposed to uniformity, in the Muslim setting, both in history and on the contemporary scene, has often been invoked to counter the essentialist assumptions of Islam, entertained not only by Islamists, but also by a critical number of Western intellectuals and policy-makers. The arguments of hybridity and ambivalence in relation to Islam have been advanced mostly on the basis of the Muslim praxeology, which clearly resists a monolithic understanding of Islam. *Law and Power in the Islamic World* by Sami Zubaida goes beyond the praxeology and asserts hybridity also for the *shari'a*, the purportedly revealed,

holy law of Islam, pivotal to the current Islamist discourse.[3] An exercise in the genealogy of the concept, the work recounts the historical formation and the past and present functioning of the *shari'a*, displaying its contingent nature, and drawing attention to the elements of human agency and, concomitant with it, power intrinsic to it. As well as the formal-textual sources of Islam, accordingly, liberal borrowings from a variety of existing customs and traditions contributed to the initiation and development of the *shari'a*. Power requisites and policy expediency served in the process as the selective, organizing principles. Further, as the formal sources were invariably construed in terms of policy, the latter came to dominate as the sole genuine authority. The inevitable conclusion, then, is that, a mere political construction devoid of constraining capability, and with only a legitimating function, the *shari'a* as such never existed.

The *shari'a* inconceivable as a self-same entity appears largely to do with one fundamental paradox, consistently ignored in the Islamist discourse. Treated as God-given, complete, and thus stagnant, Islam as a formal creed has unavoidably been in an antipodean relationship with history and the exigencies of time and space. Islam, in other words, has had to negate history for the sake of its self-declared autonomy. Yet, aspiring at the same time to be a timely enterprise with practical, worldly relevance, Islam has also had to address the elusive manifestations of time, a demand on Islam bolstered by its early rise to power. This seems to have necessitated interpretations on a wide range of issues inviting the mediation of human agency and power, which have subsequently subverted the formal autonomy.

The paradox, according to Zubaida, has been apparent in the functioning of the *shari'a* in the form of a resilient duality of the law and public interest, of the *shari'a* and *maslaha*, with the latter, as expediency, crucially overriding in points of conflict. The dichotomy, formulated by Muslim jurists from as early as the fourteenth century (p. 15), has found a niche, not surprisingly, in the application of the *shari'a* also in the present-day Iran (p. 210), revealingly so, considering that, unlike the Sunni Islam, *maslaha* was not historically part of the Shi'i jurisprudence. Zubaida's reading in the volume is an implicit deconstruction of the binary, whereby the supplementary, contingent term, *maslaha*, comes to define the identity term, *the shari'a*, essentialized by Islamists.

The first three chapters in the volume are devoted to an exploration of the sources of the *shari'a*, the historical institutions for its implementation, and its relationship with power. Historically, the *shari'a* appears to have been formed principally by opinion (*ra'y*), supported, only in later stages, by the prophetic tradition (*hadith*), itself incessantly constructed and re-constructed, and then by the divine revelation, the Quran. This is the exact reverse of the hierarchy of the

sources postulated in the fundamentalist accounts. What is more, the institutions which were utilized from the earliest times to implement the *shari'a* built on, and *ex post facto* islamicized, the existing traditions, local and peripheral (chiefly Persian and Byzantine). The delivery of justice through these institutions largely conformed to the prevalent power structures, with endemic corruption among the personnel. On the main, what jurists did was to justify the existing order in terms of the *shari'a*, lending support to administrations by islamizing the actual practices of power. This, in turn, generated and consolidated the power of the jurists. Next, Zubaida discusses the striving in the Islamic world, from the mid-nineteenth century, for legal reform by blending the *shari'a* rules with the codified law imported from the West, which culminated in the nationalization of the law in the bulk of Muslim states after the Western mould. The penultimate chapter in the book is about the uneasy combination of the *shari'a* and the modern justice system in today's Egypt, the subject of a continuing, fiery national debate. The final chapter is on the practice of the *shari'a* in the post-revolutionary Iran, which the author finds not altogether felicitous with the acknowledged dictates of the *shari'a*, and beset with inconsistencies.

Zubaida argues on the whole against an essentializing view of the *shari'a*, as posited by Muslim ideologues. He maintains that the *shari'a* emerged in a complex interaction between rulers and jurists, and functioned as a discursive front for power structures. Yet, simultaneously, Zubaida seems to retain a non-interpretive, essentialized view of the *shari'a* in that he tends to register, throughout the volume, the apparent inconsistencies between policies adopted by specific administrations and the *shari'a* rules. He cites, for instance, the Ottoman practices of fining for certain offences and *devshirme* (confiscation of boys from the non-Muslim subjects), among others, established by imperial edicts and with the consent of the religious establishment, as exemplifying practices not justified under the *shari'a*, thus subscribing to a fixed concept of it. 'Many of the practices central to Ottoman rule', he notes, 'were clearly at variance with *shari'a* principle [*sic*]' (p. 115). This is manifestly at odds with the main thrust of his argument, which treats the *shari'a* as no more than a chimera, a political construction. A substantive concept of the *shari'a*, eschewed in the practice of pragmatist and corrupt Muslim administrations, is in fact a view akin to that of the Islamists, who disown much of the historical practice and urge a return to the fundamentals.

The study rests almost entirely on secondary evidence in its historical account, which diminishes the originality of the work. In places, the secondary evidence is used somewhat selectively, sources relied on by the Islamists ignored, without a discernible reason for the choice. More disturbing still is the

occasional insensitivity of the work in its anachronisms and inapt cross-cultural swings. The Kharijites are described, for instance, as 'the Jacobins of early Islam' (p. 85), and the persecution Ibn Hanbal, an 8th century Muslim jurist, had to endure as 'inquisition' (p. 87). Yet, altogether this is an able study and makes a fine addition to the growing literature on political Islam.

While the studies discussed in this article provide important insights into Middle Eastern history and politics, they fall short of offering convincing interpretations of Islamic politics in contemporary world affairs. What they contribute, however, is a conceptualization of Islam and of Islamic politics as scholarly objects void of any obscure or mystified nature, fully open to historical and political inquiry.

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[1] Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[2] Naveed S. Sheikh, *The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy in a World of States* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

[3] Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).