ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

Misunderstandings among societies and cultures are still common. The West's view of Islam fails to see the compatibility of democracy and Muslim societies. Terrorism, too easily associated with Islam, further blurs the picture. Underdevelopment is not the fate of Muslim societies. Prosperity, democracy and good governance can exist. Freer and more participatory structures are needed to benefit from human assets. The Turkish experience has shown that democracy and Islam are compatible and the West can contribute to this. Yet all countries have to find their own solutions, applied at their own speeds. Imposing change is not helpful. Locally owned projects will have a greater chance of success.

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T he dividing line between domestic politics and international relations is more dubious than ever today. With the added impact of globalization, it has become more difficult to analyze political movements solely by referring to domestic factors or international developments. This is especially true for radical movements within Islamic societies that frequently use religious references and resort to violence in their struggle. The emergence of these actors, which have domestic as well as transnational characters, has led many to conclude that extremist groups resorting to violence and terrorism in the name of Islam are direct products of the Islamic faith and Muslim societies at large. Such a conclusion is deceptive.

This misleading perception indicates that the average observer has failed to question the sweeping generalizations about Islam, Muslim societies, and individuals, and that a militant minority within Muslim societies has effectively exploited the sentiments of Muslim masses and purports to speak on their behalf. Many then ask: Is Islam prone to conflict and unable to generate peaceful and democratic regimes? The catastrophic events of September 11 have blurred the picture further, endangering peace and stability in many parts of the world. Consequently, in our search to understand and find answers, the question of the compatibility of Islam with democracy inevitably appears before us.
The intellectual background in many parts of the West before September 11, mainly set by the unfortunate thesis known as "clash of civilizations," curtailed the traditional role that enlightened elites would play in offering humane and imaginative answers to problems without losing the support of the masses. As for the Muslim societies, their failure to create the conditions of freer and more participatory regimes has only increased the chances of the clash of civilizations thesis to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Before addressing the more important issue of democracy and Islam, a few clarifications of two current matters are in order:

When terrorists groups carry out operations against their perceived targets, they could indeed believe in the worthiness of their "sacred" and political cause. It is clear that they claim to act in the name of religion. But the mere fact of claiming to act in the name of Islam does not validate their assertion. If we do not accept their rationale behind resorting to terrorism as a method, why should we accept their claim to represent Islam, especially when the overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide do not?

Most terrorist groups claiming to act in the name of Islam try to fill a vacuum in the political system. This is a socio-political vacuum created by the continuing shortcomings of the regimes in most parts of the Muslim world. Muslim societies cannot continue to deny their own responsibility in failing to advance their societies and keep pointing to outsiders as the source of their problems. The responsibility of outsiders cannot be denied, but that is another topic for discussion. Extremist groups, who conveniently monopolize the voice of opposition/dissent and eventually create conditions not any less authoritarian than what they fight against, easily exploit this weakness. As such, these extremist and violent groups help perpetuate the undemocratic social practices of their societies, robbing them of the chance to reform peacefully from within.

Having given these explanations, I can now turn to the larger issue: Islam and democracy. There is an underlying suspicion in the West about how compatible democracy is with non-Western societies at large. Some of the doubts are attributed to the unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions that prevail in developing societies. Another, publicly less vocal explanation is the unsuitability of democracy for these societies due to cultural/civilizational traits.

Societal prejudices aside, giving so little credit to non-Western, and for our purposes, Muslim societies is partly attributable to a specific understanding of democracy as developed in the political dynamics of Western societies during the last two centuries. One can argue that Muslim societies have a history of social arrangements that are pro-democratic, albeit not satisfying contemporary definitions of parliamentary democracy. In fact, Amartya Sen recently reminded everyone that non-Western historical roots of pluralism, diversity and basic liberties, including the period following the birth of Islam, have been largely ignored by students of democracy in the West.[1] What is important is that Islam does not in and of itself pose an obstacle to the establishment of a democratic regime.

Even for the novice observer, there is enough evidence pointing to elements of Islam that would well support democratic structures, let alone a democratic sense of life. The Koranic principle of *shura* (a consultative decision-making process), *ijma* (consensus/agreement of the community) and the practice of *ijtihad* (independent analysis or interpretation of Islamic law), as well as the Constitution of Medina point to the essential existence of a democracy-friendly and pluralist view of the world in the Islamic tradition.

Indeed, the golden age of Islam was a major contribution to human thought. As a reflection of the respect for human intellect, medieval Islamic philosophers' reason was considered a source of truth. Pluralism and dialogue were the norm and had no contradiction with personal piety whatsoever. Even the Islamic, patrimonial Ottoman State demonstrated "remarkable skill in organization and administration, and some very interesting innovations in the area of statesmanship that included, among others, the elaboration of a dynamic system of socio-cultural pluralism."[2]

 Such an approach has not, regrettably, come to symbolize much of the political history of Islamic societies since then. But that has more to do with *homo politicus* and the struggles among societies and empires, rather than Islam itself.

Islam, as an awing faith, can provide elements for those who would rather selectively refer to the Koran and the Islamic tradition to legitimize their particular socio-political choices, power relationships or traditions. This has been the case in the more recent part

[1] Sen, Amartya 'Democracy and Its Global Roots-Why Democratization is Not the Same as Westernization', The New Republic, 6 October 2003, pp. 28-35.
[2] Ayubi, Nazih N. (1995) Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East. New York: IB Tauris, p.66.

of Islam's history. But the fact remains that Islam does not foresee a specific system of state. Political regimes that heavily refer to Islam represent national or regional political cultures, not the embodiment of an ideal state of Islam.

Nor is there in today's world a hierarchical authority that can claim to speak for the whole of Islam since the abolishment of the Caliphate by the founders of the Turkish Republic. Moreover, it makes no sense to talk about an Islamic foreign policy. Unlike what extremists would like us to believe, Islam does not need to lay down a blueprint of government, at home or abroad, for Muslims to live happy and meaningful lives. The idea of a united and monolithic Islamic political entity is, therefore, a construct in the minds of some, not a tangible reality, and especially not a necessity.

Admittedly, in trying to gauge the compatibility of Islam and democracy, one is also obliged to study the experience of different Muslim societies. Unfortunately, most of present day Muslim societies would largely fail the test of democracy. But there is a big exception, big enough to give hope for tens of millions of other Muslims around the world: the case of Turkey.

Though emanating from the particular conditions of its history and tradition, the Turkish experience with democratization is essentially a self-imposed process, a matter of free choice for a predominantly Muslim people. The desire to give Turkish people the best that mankind had achieved was the starting point of Kemal Atatürk's reforms. The same goal is the main thrust of present day Turkish aspirations to join the EU. Islam, as a faith, is not an obstacle in this endeavor.

Moreover, Turkey's Islamic identity has not hindered Turkey's interaction with and effective participation and membership in Western institutions and organizations. The successful conclusion of Turkey's accession to the EU will be a further demonstration of the compatibility of a Muslim society with a predominantly Christian populace brought together by and integrating around common, universal and democratic values.

At the same time, the success of the Turkish experience owes much to the principle of secularism. However, unlike what many non-secular Muslims believe, the principle of secularism, attributable to the State, does not hinder people from practicing their religion. On the contrary, by allowing for pluralism rather than a single state religion, secularism functions as a guarantor of all creeds and religious practices. Consequently, the personal piety of Muslims in Turkey exists alongside an official system of government that is in principle secular.

The beneficiaries of parliamentary democracy in Turkey are the Turkish people at large, 99 percent of whom are Muslims. The Turkish experience in political, economic and social development rests on the belief that it is perfectly possible to advance society in all fields, with Islam continuing to play an important role in people's lives. Gradually building participatory politics, democracy has taken root in Turkey and continues to perform a socializing function for all, including even the more radical groups. Once societal groups that have their own political agendas get a taste of democracy, the system

starts to win them over as new benefactors. Such democratic socialization can be an effective tool to accommodate radical inclinations of the disenchanted masses in Muslim countries.

Turkey is well placed to play an important role in the project to replace the clash of civilizations with the compatibility and harmony of civilizations. One should not, of course, suggest that the Turkish model is directly applicable to other Muslim states. Yet, there is enough substance in Turkey's experience to be a source of inspiration for other Muslim countries. Understandably, the pace and method of reform are for each country to decide. But the moment of decision has arrived. With globalization changing inter-state relations, economic dynamics, as well as domestic politics all around the world, those societies that cannot come to terms with new realities will feel the negative consequences of globalization, rather than benefit from the opportunities it presents.

As a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkey feels obliged to point to the need within the Islamic World for reform; not the reform of Islam, but the reform of governance. It is with this understanding that the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mr Abdullah Gül, has been calling for the Muslim world to take inspiration from Islam's intellectual and spiritual wealth and address the political, economic and social shortcomings of their societies.

There is no single or simple formula to achieve this goal. One has to recognize the peculiarities and different historical experiences of different societies. Yet Muslim societies share a common core that is rich and beneficial. This core is fully compatible with universal values. These values are "universal" because no one can claim a monopoly over humanistic values that are the common inheritance of civilization. Different cultures make their own contributions that end up promoting the constant and multifaceted development of human civilization. Islam has shown significant accomplishments, but it has so much more to offer.

Each Muslim country will have to find its own solution. Imposition from the outside brings temporary and half-way solutions at best. To be able to find their own solutions, Muslim states need to benefit from the intellectual wealth of their people. This human potential prospers when freedom, tolerance and mutual respect come together to form a democratic society, and where fundamental rights are protected and the rule of law and good governance reigns. In the same vein, transparency and accountability of the state, encouragement of political and economic participation, and gender equality make societies and regimes stronger in the long run. This is what the Turkish experience is about.

History provides scant reason for Muslim societies to have confidence in foreign powers. Hence, there can be sensitivities to using the tools and concepts developed in the West to bring about change in the Muslim world. But the human polity at large, in essence, forms a coherent whole that shows common characteristics and inclinations. Muslim societies are no exception. Therefore, the wheel does not have to be reinvented. Perhaps Muslim societies will produce their own terms and concepts, but the universal values and

principles for the well-being of mankind are evident and they are part and parcel of the Islamic faith as well. The challenge is to approach the issue with self-confidence and an open mind.

Recently, there is growing international debate about the need for change in the Middle East. The "Greater Middle East" initiative by the US has received mixed reactions. Many in the region question its applicability, timing and "real purpose." Many in Europe, with fresh memories of the Transatlantic differences over Iraq, feel obliged to double check, to say the least, American methods, if not the direction of transformation that is desired. In this context, the Palestinian problem presents itself yet again as a critical element.

The on-going debate about transforming the Middle East in its wider sense can well contribute to overcoming both the unnecessary differences between Europe and America, and also the lack of confidence between Middle Eastern societies and the West. This can be achieved by efforts from all sides. The US has an interest in listening to the region and its allies and refrain from unilateral action. In fact, after a clumsy start, the US is showing signs of willingness to work with "partners" as opposed to imposing its own blueprint. Europe seems intent to form its own project, sharing much of the declared American objectives and careful about the sensitivities in the region. Less than positive European perceptions of the US and its foreign policy – seen in different degrees among various EU countries – need to be balanced by a sincere effort to understand Americans and appeal to their reason. Antagonizing one another across the Atlantic is no way forward for either side. Both also have to display and use cross-cultural skills in dealing with the Middle East. Indeed, a high premium is put on sincerity in the region, as intangible as this concept is. The way in which help from outside is offered and developed with regional inputs will be one test of sincerity.

On the other hand, the regional countries need to take seriously the challenge their societies face, with or without Western projects. Talk about change has hitherto been too little, too late. Regimes have to overcome their socio-cultural fears and see the masses for what they really are: the increasingly undeniable source of political legitimacy, albeit lacking in democratic experience (not of their own fault). Impetus for change has to be fed from internal dynamics. Democratization, perhaps slowly in many cases, will come. Regimes cannot row against the tide in the long term. The regimes that are expected to resist change the most are the ones that need it the most. If an internationally sponsored, locally owned project of voluntary and gradual change can be developed, this can be an honorable way to move forward.

The Palestinian and the larger Arab-Israeli problem will remain a major obstacle to achieving success with region-wide initiatives. No regional peace initiative will be complete if the Palestinian issue is left to linger. At the same time, however, this problem should not indefinitely delay efforts to seek solutions to all the other problems that preoccupy societies in the region. It should be possible to start addressing the multi-faceted problems in the region provided that there is a commitment and concrete action by both the Palestinian and Israeli parties, encouraged by all, to refrain from steps that

could have adverse effects on the wider regional efforts. Eventually, the two processes will create mutually supportive dynamics.

Turkey, remains in the middle of all this; a country with its own successes in transformation, determined to overcome remaining shortcomings on its road to membership to the EU, having historical and cultural affinity with the Middle East, an ally of the US, and a regional actor enjoying excellent relations with both the Israelis an the Palestinians. Moreover, it sees regional transformation as a goal to promote its national interest, i.e. securing peace and stability allowing, thereby, collective efforts to tap into the regions potential. Turkey's hindsight derived from its own experience suggests that in the Middle East realism should be the rule of thumb, but that not much is realized without idealism.