

Religion and Islam
in Contemporary International Relations

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Introduction *

In terms of Islam and international relations, the year 1979 was a turning point. A post-colonial period where socialism and secularism had reigned dominantly in the Muslim world was abruptly ended, and a new period started where the forces of Islam—religiously, politically and ideologically—gained momentum. The year 1979 was the year, of course, of the Iranian Revolution, but also of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (leading to, among other things, the American and Saudi funding of Osama Bin Laden’s training camps), the introduction of shariah criminal law in US ally Pakistan (hence the uneasy trinity of ‘Allah, Army and America’), the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Saudi zealots (eventually evicted by French paratroopers), and the peace accords between Egypt and Israel (applauded by the West, but condemned by the Arab world for Egypt’s solo diplomacy).

The year 1979 hence yielded a volatile cocktail of events that put Islam on the international agenda, which has since then instilled in Western foreign policies a fear of any political expression that was Islamically motivated. On the other hand, Western nations have simultaneously maintained their traditional blind eye to anything that has to do with religion in international relations. These two together—*anxiety as well as blindness towards religion in general and Islam in particular*—have created an unhinged foreign policy of Western nations *vis-à-vis* the Muslim world that is encapsulated in the dilemma of wanting to address the Islamic resurgence in order to stem

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undesired developments, but at the same time fearing that acknowledgement of this resurgence may accelerate it in the wrong direction.

It is telling that more than 30 years later, this dilemma still cripples Western foreign policies *vis-à-vis* the Muslim world. The large numbers of reports and research showing that in recent decades the Islamic resurgence has rapidly developed into many different trends, ranging from militant and revolutionary to liberal and democratic, and arguing that these forces have become so engrained in Muslim societies that ignoring them amounts not to a blind eye but complete blindness—these voices have not yet been translated into an adaptation of Western foreign policies. An exception is perhaps the United States, when President Obama broke with tradition by addressing ‘Muslims all over the world’ in his speech of 4 June 2009 in Cairo.¹ But it still needs to be seen whether this is a genuine change of policy or an invitation for further dialogue on mutual understanding.

This paper will make an appraisal of the present state of affairs regarding Islam in international relations. It will do so by making an inventory of which policies pursued by Muslim states in the international arena can actually be called ‘Islamic’². Based on this paper’s findings, it will be demonstrated that although Islam plays a dominant role as the authoritative discourse in domestic policies in Muslim countries, it hardly does so in the international arena.

However, the few typical ‘Islamic’ issues that play roles in Muslim–Western relations cause distinct differentiation between the two sides, or are deliberately used to that end. This paper will argue that Western states allow these issues to dominate the wider international relations. This, combined with the still prevailing Western unwillingness to address issues that are related to religion, is actually paralysing Western counter-policies.

As a consequence, Western foreign policies *vis-à-vis* the Muslim world may need some revision, given their increasing focus on the assumed Islamic dimension of Muslim foreign policies. In addition, Western foreign policies should distinguish between the national and international politics of Muslim countries. Finally, Western foreign policies should not be sidetracked by Islamic discourse, but should focus on the actual needs and demands beneath that discourse. The final section of the paper will present some suggestions for these approaches.

1) The full text of US President Obama’s Cairo speech is available on the White House’s website at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/.

2) This approach is different from that taken in the scant literature on the subject, like the chapters under the heading ‘The International Relations of Political Islam’ in John L. Esposito, *Political Islam. Revolution, Radicalism or Reform*, London: Lynne Rienner, 1997; K. Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights: Implications for International Relations*, London: IB Tauris, 2007; and Bassam Tibi, ‘Islamic Law/Shari’a, Human Rights, Universal Morality and International Relations’, in *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol.16, Nr.2, 1994, p.277-299.

International Relations between the Western and Muslim Worlds

For the purpose of this research, I have deliberately chosen not to use specific academic angles or theories of diplomacy, political science or international relations, for it is my contention that by doing so, overlapping issues may be missed³. This is particularly the case with the topic under discussion here. This position, however, demands clarification of what is meant by both international relations and Islam.

With ‘international relations’, I refer to the arena where states, and the themes on which states, interact. Moreover, this paper restricts the discussion to ‘Islamic’ themes in the international arena, whereby the setting is that of Muslim states *vis-à-vis* the Western states rather than the other way round. This distinction is rather crude, but it will be argued that in so far as Islam does play a role in the international arena, it does so by causing these two ‘worlds’ to be pitted against each other. The interactions between the two sides precipitate into the mutual image-making of Muslim and Western societies and policies.

It must be admitted that this setting of the Muslim world against the Western world leaves out an important issue, namely the role of Islam in relations *within* the Muslim world—that is, among Muslim states and Islamic organizations—for this is, in itself, also a form of international relations. This

3) See for an analysis of the challenges that ‘the world of Islam’ pose to the Western concepts of international relations: Mustapha Kamal Pasha, ‘Fractured worlds: Islam, Identity and International Relations’, in *Global society*, Vol.17, No.2, 2003.

is another dynamic, however, than the one under discussion here, and will only be referred to when relevant to Muslim–Western relations.

In addition, we will see that the role of Islamic international and transnational organizations is quite limited in our discussion, the main reason being that few Islamic organizations have taken to the international arena. The programmes of the majority of Islamic organizations and movements—whether social, political or military—are limited to territorial boundaries and national contexts.⁴ Even organizations that have branched out into more than one country have become ‘domesticated’: the Muslim Brotherhood has taken on distinctly different shapes and strategies in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait and Syria; as has the *Jamaat-i-Islami* in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In addition, many Islamic organizations that do operate across borders do so within the realm of the Muslim world or global Muslim community. Most of these organizations pursue agendas of development aid or missionary work (*da’wa*).⁵

Examples of Islamic organizations that are players in the international arena, and that will receive attention below, are as diverse as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which provides a platform of cooperation among Muslim countries, networks of private financial institutions providing Islamic financial services, and al-Qaeda and groups modelled after al-Qaeda.

The next concept that needs clarification is ‘Islam’ itself. This concept forms the core of this paper and will be discussed in the following paragraph.

4) Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Modern World* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), pp. 26–27 and p. 34. Olivier Roy, in his *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 26, calls this phenomenon ‘Islam-nationalism’ and later speaks of ‘inescapable nationalism’. See also Carrie R. Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Olivier Roy, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

5) It is interesting in this respect to note that this kind of ‘international *da’wa*’ does not focus on non-Muslims, but mainly on Muslims in the ‘weaker’ countries, such as Europe or the former Soviet states.

Islam and the 'Islamization' of Discourse

In order to discuss the role of Islam in international relations, its importance to contemporary Muslim societies and Muslim states must first be assessed. It can be observed that, ever since the 1970s, Islam has become the undisputed source of authority for Muslims worldwide and, although reluctantly at first, for Muslim states' governments as well.

Islam, as such, has permeated the national discourse in Muslim countries in all domains. By now, almost all social, economic, political and personal issues are discussed in terms of Islam: what does Islam say about democracy or human rights, what about personal conduct and morality, or dress code, girls' education, and so forth? By doing so, these issues are appropriated by Islamic discourse, rendering them 'Islamic' regardless of whether they are inherently so or not. This process of Islamic valorization is what I will call 'Islamization', a notion that is crucial to the discussion here.

Let us first take a look at why Islam has gained this position of legitimacy. Observers have pointed at multiple reasons, ranging from a return to spiritual needs to providing an authentic alternative to non-native ideologies such as socialism and nationalism.⁶ One important factor for the appeal of Islam is the fact that those who preach Islam have put action where their mouth is—not only religious rhetoric, but social, economic and political

6) See, for example, Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 1991); Graham Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); John L. Esposito, *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997); and Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: Fundamentalism, De-Territorialization and the Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004).

action that is undertaken in the name of Islam has given the so-called ‘Islamists’ their credibility and constituency.

One may be opposed to the political aspirations of the Muslim Brothers or Hamas or Hezbollah, or be suspicious towards the motives of Islamic welfare organizations, but it is a fact that they provide social-economic services where their governments fail to do so.⁷ This, combined with a lack of corruption among its functionaries, has created an aura of legitimacy—Islam has for many become the equivalent of ‘caring for people’ and ‘political clean hands’.

Whether this is true or whether this perception will last once these organizations come to power is another issue (Iran and Sudan being a case in point, and the *AK Parti* in Turkey and Hamas in Palestine are already soiling their hands). But for the time being, they have contributed to Islam’s authority in any kind of discourse, whether legal, social, political, economic or otherwise.

Islam’s resulting authority has become a dominating force that disqualifies any other ideology or frame of reference, forcing secular and non-Muslim activists to phrase their arguments in Islamic jargon and logic. An interesting effect of this development, for instance, is that the improvement of women’s rights has become easier when legitimized by Islamic law.⁸ But religious jargon and arguments are not limited to legal discourse, they have also become part and parcel of political and societal discourse. If political Islam has ‘failed’ to the extent that—with the exception of Iran—no Islamic polity has been imposed,⁹ one witnesses the process of Islam seeping upwards through the capillaries of Muslim societies’ political, social and legal fabrics. Where lawyers, politicians and intellectuals were at one time fighting off resurgent Islam, many of them are now embracing it, whether in a liberal, conservative or other way.

This is not to say that Islam has obtained a monolithic presence in Muslim societies; to the contrary, a wide diversity remains within Islamic thought. One of the newer trends is that of ‘post-Islamism’: an Islamic ideology that is inclusive, aiming at tolerance and pluralism.¹⁰ The net result,

7) For Hamas, see Shaul Mishal and Avrahama Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2007). For Hezbollah, see Naim Qassem, *Hizbollah: The Story from Within* (London: Saqi Books, 2005); and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

8) Diane Singerman speaks of a ‘broader international movement’ within the Muslim world ‘reclaiming Islam’ by utilizing the Islamic sources in a ‘rights discourse’ that is aimed at improving women’s rights. See Diane Singerman, ‘Rewriting Divorce in Egypt: Reclaiming Islam, Legal Activism and Coalition Politics’, in Robert W. Hefner, *Remaking Muslim Politics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 165.

9) Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*.

10) Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

however, is that—whether tolerant or not, militant or peaceful, orthodox or liberal—Islam retains its dominant position as the paradigm of discourse. This ‘Islamization’ is dominating most of the Muslim world nowadays.

This process of ‘Islamization’ has some serious downsides. For instance, the rising authority of Islamic discourse also makes it prone to abuse by those who want to assert their position or views. Some of the issues that are being tabled by Islamic activists do not necessarily have something to do with Islam, but may be ‘Islamized’ for ulterior purposes. Moreover, if religion dominates the discourse, it will also determine the way that one voices critique of others. Similarly to accusing opponents in liberal societies of being non-liberals, or communists of being capitalists, Muslims will accuse their opponents of being un-Islamic, which by default is a charge of apostasy. With the growing domination of Islamic discourse, it is therefore not surprising that we observe an increase in accusations of apostasy, not only of artists and scholars but also of politicians and activists.¹¹

It should be noted that ‘Islamization’ is not limited to Muslims. The Western world is undergoing the same process, although sometimes unwillingly. The ease with which Westerners speak of the ‘Islamic’ world is an illustrative example, for it holds the underlying premise that this world and its people and politics are primarily religious. Indeed, it is often erroneously assumed that the laws of these countries are Islamic—an ‘Islamic’ country must logically have ‘Islamic’ laws, does it not?¹²

Similarly, when the Darfur crisis broke out in Sudan, it took a while before the Western media and policy-makers realized that Islam, as such, had little to do with it, since both victims and perpetrators were Muslim. On a different scale, but in the same order of premature assumptions, was the allusion to Islam as the cause for most Muslim countries’ lack of democracy:¹³ the fact that several (large) Muslim countries were democracies was in itself a disqualification of this argument.¹⁴

This kind of thinking is exactly in line with what Muslim conservatives and Islamists want their societies to be, but does not necessarily correspond with reality. In his June 2009 speech, President Obama clearly steered out of this confusing terminology by not once using the adverb ‘Islamic’ and consequently referring to ‘Muslims’ and ‘Muslim world’. The distinction

11) The most notorious cases are those of the Indian-British author Salman Rushdie, the Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin, and the Egyptian academic Nasr Abu Zaid.

12) For a comparative analysis of the Islamic nature of the laws and legal systems of twelve Muslim countries, see J.M. Otto, *Sharia and National Law in Muslim Countries* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2008).

13) Adrian Karatnycky, ‘Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 1, January 2002, which was based on the 2002 worldwide democracy and freedom survey by Freedom House.

14) Alfred Stephan and Graeme B. Robertson, ‘An “Arab” More than a “Muslim” Electoral Gap’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 3, July 2003.

between the two words—Muslim and Islamic—has to do with the value attached to them. A ‘Muslim country’ will in the following be defined as a country with a majority Muslim population, regardless of whether religion plays a role in their personal, social or political life. Using the adjective ‘Islamic’, meanwhile, points at a specific use of the religion: laws can be Islamic, and so can dress codes or a state structure. The distinction is of importance in order to separate religion from its believers: what Muslims do is not necessarily motivated by Islam and, vice versa, what Islam ordains is not necessarily followed by Muslims.

Islamization in the Muslim world is therefore a complex interplay of attributing values, wishful thinking, true beliefs, devotional talk and oppressive instruction. It may very well be the discourse of the true believer, but also of the shrewd politician. This often makes social and political processes in the contemporary Muslim world hard to read. The following sections will show how Islamization permeates international relations. In order to analyse that situation, it is helpful to make a distinction between Islamic activism and Islamic discourse. Or, in other words, what does one actually *do* in the name of Islam, and what does one *say* in the name of Islam? Examples of both activism and discourse will be elaborated in the next two sections.

Islamic Activism in International Relations

Of all the aspects and topics of foreign policies that are being pursued by Muslim states, it will be argued that Islam, as such, only plays a concrete and substantive—that is, activist—role in four fields: human rights; economics; war and peace; and the protection of Islam.

Human Rights

Human rights have evolved from an exclusively legal field to a key international political and diplomatic issue. For most Muslim countries, it has become the Western battering ram on their front doors. Western insistence on adopting human rights' standards has had the unfortunate counter effect of rendering human rights 'Western' constructs rather than universally accepted standards, thus enabling Muslim—and other non-Western countries, for that matter—to oppose the call for human rights as a Western ploy for global dominance.¹⁵

Many Muslims therefore consider human rights to be a Western construct that must be met with an authentic Islamic response. This has elsewhere been called the 'self-asserting argument', which carries with it a

15) A position that has been coined 'The revolt of the Third World against the West' by Hedley Bull in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 217 ff.

degree of defiance to a perceived Western hegemony and a claim to an identity that is distinctly different from the ‘West’.¹⁶

However, when we return to the actual construct and mechanisms of human rights instruments, we are talking of conventions that are ratified by numerous states, including many Muslim countries. Pitching the ‘West’ versus the ‘Muslim world’ is then merely a political ruse, for all co-signatory parties have freely entered into these conventions, and they all enjoy equal status as partners to that particular convention. In that capacity, they agree on some basic principles and are allowed to criticize each other for not adhering to those principles. Muslim countries that have signed and ratified these treaties—even when adding reservations in the name of Islam or shariah—but that at the same time complain of ‘Western’ insistence on adherence to human rights, are playing simultaneously on the political–rhetorical and legal chess board.

In some cases, they have combined the political and legal boards by creating the new game of ‘Islamic human rights’—that is, human rights that emanate from Islamic principles and hold significance for Muslims only.¹⁷ By doing so, they still pledge allegiance to human rights as a principle, especially in the form of international conventions, but at the same time assert a separate identity for themselves. This position can be criticized for several reasons. First, the legal instruments that have been developed as ‘Islamic human rights’ pretend to be congruent with international standards of human rights, but they are not.¹⁸ Also, outsiders—Westerners, or non-Muslims if you will—are denied participation in debates or criticism of Islamic human rights documents for the mere reason that they lack (religious) ownership: by naming them ‘Islamic’ human rights, they are appropriated for Islamic use only.

16) Maurits S. Berger, ‘Islamic Views on International Law’, in Paul Meerts (ed.), *Culture and International Law* (The Hague: Hague Academic Press/T.M.C. Asser, 2008), pp. 105–118.

17) Such instruments include the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981) and the Cairo Declaration of Islamic Human Rights (1994). In its Final Statement of 2008, the Organization of the Islamic Conference called for the drafting of Islamic versions of the Declaration of Human Rights, Covenant of Women’s Rights and Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as well as the establishment of an OIC High Commissioner on Human Rights. See OIC, ‘Final Communiqué of the Eleventh Session of the Islamic Summit Conference: Session of the Islamic Ummah in the 21st Century’, held in Dakar, Senegal, 13–14 March 2008, para. 105, available online at <http://www.oic-oci.org/is11/english/res/11-SUM-POA-RES-FINAL.pdf>.

18) Ann E. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1991), p. 198.

Economics

Islamic finance is a product of post-modernity, for it only came about in the 1970s, but it soon gained speed, sailing the winds of Islamic resurgence and increasing private capital income from oil revenues. Islamic finance is an exponent of Islamic activism, for it blames the corruption and dysfunction of Muslim states and societies on their economic systems, and offers Islamic finance as the alternative.¹⁹ A distinct feature of this area is that it belongs to the private sector. Only very few Muslim countries have tried to adopt a nationwide model of Islamic finance, and those that have done so or pretend to have done so—such as Iran and Pakistan—still have difficulties regulating it.

On an international level, however, Islamic finance is soaring. Many Western banks and financial institutions have taken to Islamic finance, either as a separate office or as part of their services. Their motivation is purely business: here is a blossoming sector where money is to be made. This is therefore perhaps the only field of Islamic law where Westerners are eagerly willing to learn and to adapt. Islam is the driving agency in this particular area, voluntarily taken up by those who want to jump on the bandwagon of financial self-interest.

Especially in Europe and the United States, one witnesses an increasing tendency among Muslims to resort to Islamic finance as part of religious obligations that form their identity as Muslims in a non-Muslim environment. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, the British government actively stimulated the amendment of laws that made compliance with Islamic financial rules possible.

All in all, where ‘Islamic’ issues tend to cause friction between the Muslim and Western worlds, Islamic finance is the exception. It is embraced by both sides as a lucrative business, with the interesting result that lawyers and bankers on Wall Street will take a serious interest in the latest *fatwa* by a renowned Islamic scholar as if it was the latest ruling of a higher court.

War and Peace (and Terrorism)

Many international wars involving both Muslim and Western sides have been fought in the past 50 years. Sometimes Muslim and Western states were on opposite sides (such as the 1956 Suez Crisis or the 2003 invasion of Iraq); sometimes they were allies (as in the 1991 Iraq War); and sometimes Muslim states were fighting each other (for example, the 1980–1988 Iraq–Iran War or the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait).

19) M. El-Gamal, “‘Interest’ and the Paradox of Contemporary Islamic Law and Finance”, *Fordham International Law Journal*, December 2003; and T. Kuran, *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

But both Muslim governments and Islamic organizations have started to frame issues of war and peace in Islamic terms. The defence of homeland and resistance against foreign powers of occupation have become immersed with the religious duty to defend the abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*).²⁰ Historically this is nothing new, of course, but it has been given new impetus since the nationalist and secular period in the mid-twentieth century. The ‘resurgence’ of Islamizing issues of war and peace can be traced back to the Six Day War in 1967. The Arab defeat was blamed by some Islamists on the lack of religiosity, for the Arab states involved in the war were at that time secular, socialist and nationalist, as opposed to Israel, the Islamists argued, because Israel had fought as a ‘Jewish state’, and therefore triumphed. The heralded Egyptian ‘victory’ in the 1973 war²¹ was consequently explained by some as the result of being more Islamically motivated (for instance, the code name was Operation *Badr*, after a famous battle waged by the prophet, and the new battle cry was ‘*Allahu Akbar*’).

This religious argumentation in battle situations—we can win if we fight in the name of Islam—has gained immense momentum in the past three decades because of the armed conflicts that indeed have been waged and won in the name of Islam. To name the most important conflicts: Afghan mujahidin claim that their persistent *jihad* forced a Soviet retreat in 1989; Hezbollah claims the same for the Israeli retreat from southern Lebanon in 2001 and the unsuccessful Israeli attack on Hezbollah in 2006; Hamas claims victory for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the foiled attack on Gaza in 2008; and al-Qaeda will surely claim victory for the forthcoming withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

These military ‘victories’ have added to the growing righteousness of the claim that victory can only be won when fought in the name of Islam—or, to some, that Islam is indeed victorious. Whether this is true or not is not the issue: it is the perception that counts. And indeed, the image of the Islamic warrior with a Kalashnikov defeating the military might of the world’s superpowers has an enormous appeal among Muslims. For these reasons, Israel’s attack on Hezbollah in 2006 has merely increased the international popularity of this otherwise small Lebanese organization and made it in the eyes of the Muslim world ‘the new vanguard of armed resistance to Israel and America’.²²

This Islamization of issues of war and peace has increased the debates among Muslims worldwide on the Islamic legal justifications of the various aspects of military action. Suicide missions, civil casualties or targets, Muslim-versus-Muslim combatants and Muslim-versus-non-Muslim

20) Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, p. 8. See also Ruud Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 192 and 196.

21) The victory consisted of the breaking of Israeli lines, in particular the supposedly impenetrable Ber-Lev line along the Suez Canal.

22) Fawaz Gerges, ‘Gauging Terrorism—Part I: Lebanon’, *YaleGlobalOnline*, 15 August 2006.

combatants—all of these issues are discussed, justified or condemned on the basis of Islamic legal argumentation.²³

In this respect it is interesting to note that the issue of terrorism has been dealt with by the Muslim world as an entirely different matter. While organizations such as al-Qaeda may argue that they are involved in a war that is justified by Islam, governments of Muslim countries, as well as Islamic organizations and scholars, have unanimously condemned acts of terrorism against civilians as contradictory to Islam.²⁴

We may then conclude that Islamic activism in terms of war and peace is mainly an internal issue among Muslims. However, it directly affects the West in three ways. First, when Western countries are involved in armed conflicts in Muslim countries, whether as occupation or intervention forces, on the national government's invitation, or as an international peacekeeping mission. Islam will then quickly be utilized in terms of self-defence.

Second, some militant Islamic organizations like Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda have developed the concept of the 'far enemy'—denoting Western countries supporting Muslim regimes—as opposed to the Muslim regimes that are denoted as the 'near enemy'. The notion of 'far' and 'near' allows the militants to widen their field of military operations from the Muslim country into the territories of the supporting Western countries. While this concept is not based on classical Islamic doctrine, it has become typical for modern Islamic militant doctrine.²⁵

Third, defending an Islamic homeland has become amalgamated with the defence of Islam. This is a much wider conceptual approach than defending territory, and 'defending' or 'protecting' Islam has become manifest in so many different ways and means that it needs separate discussion.

23) See, for example, Yvonne Haddad, 'The War of Fatwas during the 1990–1991 Gulf War', in Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick and David S. Powers (eds), *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and their Fatwas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and the many fatwas on suicide bombings that target civilians, as in the cases of the Twin Towers, Iraq and Israel.

24) The caveat 'against civilians' is very important, because it allows for suicide attacks against the military (and hence clears Hezbollah from being a terrorist organization). The suicide missions by Hamas against Israeli civilians are controversial, however, because some Islamic scholars, such as Al-Qaradawi, have allowed it with the argument that all Israeli civilians are, will be, or have been drafted into the army.

25) Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Protecting Islam

Protecting Islam is a form of Islamic activism that has its roots in the early 1990s, both domestically and internationally.

Domestically it was conducted in a variety of ways. The self-proclaimed protectors of Islam mostly targeted individuals who are accused of offending or abusing Islam. Those accused were mostly Muslim, but sometimes also non-Muslim, and have predominantly been politicians, intellectuals and artists. It was their politics, writings, films or books that were considered an affront to Islam that needed to be defended. The means to undertake this defence were different. The early 1990s witnessed several murders of politicians and intellectuals, with the justification that their un-Islamic actions had rendered them apostates and therefore liable to the death penalty. In addition to the killings, there was also an increase in death threats by the issuance of religious rulings (*fatwas*) accusing persons of apostasy, as well as the initiation of lawsuits against such persons. These actions, together with the aforementioned increasing dominance of Islamic discourse, have contributed to a general atmosphere of social pressure—if not actual fear—in the Muslim world that compels one to behave and speak in accordance with the tenets of Islam.

The Muslim world has witnessed many of these instances—and in some cases even governments have actively participated in persecuting these individuals—but they are also known in the Western world: the death warrant against Salman Rushdie; the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh; the threats and boycotts following the Danish cartoons. A merging of the national and international dimensions took place in 2008 when a Jordanian court granted itself international jurisdiction to hear cases that had been filed by the Jordanian prosecutor-general against twelve Europeans (including a Danish cartoonist and the Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders) for blasphemy, demeaning Islam and Muslim feelings, and slandering and insulting the prophet Muhammad in violation of the Jordanian Penal Code.²⁶

While most cases were initiated by individuals and directed against individuals, the protection of Islam has also become a major source of Islamic activism in the international arena. The target of these efforts is the negative attitudes that the Western world allegedly holds against Islam, and the means being used to protect Islam are mainly diplomatic and legal.

The international protection of Islam started in 1999 with over fifty Muslim states united in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) introducing the Resolution on Combating Defamation of Islam at the United Nations Human Rights Commission (which in 2006 was restructured as the Human Rights Council). Since then, the Resolution has been passed every

26) Fox News, 'Jordan Summons Danish Cartoonist on Blasphemy Charges', 4 June 2008; and Reuters, 'Jordan Charges Dutch Politician with Blasphemy', 1 July 2008.

year—the ‘Islam’ in the title has since been replaced by ‘Religions’—and since 2005 also at the General Assembly of the United Nations.

This agenda has been pushed ever more forcefully since 2001 and again after reports on European Islamophobia (which were first published in 2002),²⁷ the Danish cartoons (in 2006) and the Dutch film *Fitna* (in 2008). After the Danish cartoon crisis, for instance, the OIC called for inserting a clause on the defamation of religion in the existing UN conventions. The EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, responded positively—albeit vaguely—to this proposal.²⁸ The European Parliament, however, warned against restricting freedom of opinion for the sole benefit of meeting the sentiments of religious organizations.²⁹

When the short film *Fitna* was issued by the Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, the OIC again stressed the need to criminalize the defamation of religions. It succeeded in passing two resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council, one urging member states to provide ‘adequate protection’ against the defamation of religions,³⁰ and the second amending the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression to report also on instances in which abuse of the right of freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination.³¹ Again, the EU member states voted against the resolution.

These resolutions are non-binding, but reflect the persistent and orchestrated effort of Muslim states, their cooperation and the use of international legal and diplomatic channels to push this particular issue on the international agenda. ‘Defamation of religion’ is obviously meant for the benefit of Muslim countries themselves as a way to protect their Islamic identity against alleged insults from Western sources, but it is also based on a clever combination of scientific research (the European Islamophobia reports), internationally acclaimed conduct (diplomacy and the use of international forums and instruments) and international law.

These legal and diplomatic efforts by Muslim countries to have the defamation of Islam persecuted and criminalized are novel in the international arena. Several alarmed reactions in the Western world pointed at a worrying

27) European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), *Summary Report into Islamophobia in the EU following 11 September 2001* (Vienna: EUMC, 2002).

28) ‘We are working on some ideas. I cannot be very precise, but we are working on some ideas that maybe it is possible to get through’, quoted in ‘Solana Warns Against EU–Muslim Cartoon Rift’, in *EUObserver.com*, 15 February 2006.

29) Resolution 1510 of 28 June 2006: ‘Freedom of expression, as protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, should not be further restricted to meet increasing sensitivities of certain religious groups’.

30) Resolution 7/19, ‘Combating Defamation of Religions’, doc. A/HRC/7/L.11, 28 March 2008.

31) Resolution 7/36, ‘Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression’, doc. A/HRC/7/L.11/Add.1, 28 March 2008.

encroachment on the freedom of expression.³² This may very well be true, but it is important for our argument here to distinguish between *what* the Muslim countries want, on the one hand, and *how* they pursue this, on the other. While a lot may be said about their goals, it is interesting to note that they make use of internationally accepted standards of diplomacy and international legal instruments.

With regard to the content of the matter—that is, protecting religions by criminalizing the defamation thereof—there appears to be a clear-cut divide between Muslim and Western states regarding this issue, with Western states rallying around the flag of freedom of opinion and the Muslim states around the flag of freedom of (that is, protection of) religion. But whether this is truly a matter of principle is debatable. For how can freedom of opinion be so typically ‘Western’ and respect for religion be so typically ‘Muslim’? The fact that plenty of Muslims are claiming the right to express their opinion freely, and that plenty of Westerners frown at the abuses and critiques hurled at religion, should tell us otherwise. Still, in the international arena, this dichotomy is upheld by both sides. It could therefore be argued that this is a conflict of identities rather than principles.³³ We will turn to this issue in the next section.

32) See, for example, Elizabeth Samson, ‘Criminalizing Criticism of Islam’, *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 10 September 2008.

33) It is, of course, hard to prove that it is not the issues but the identity that is at stake. But it is telling that in 2008 the Secretary-General of the OIC refused to meet Dutch Muslim representatives who wanted to explain that Islamophobia in the Netherlands is not as bad as depicted by the OIC, and that they would prefer the OIC not to push its agenda in the way that it does.

Islamic Discourse in International Relations

After discussing Islamic activism, we now turn to issues of Islamic discourse. While Islamic discourse is all pervasive in the domestic arena of Muslim countries, in international relations it can be dissected into two main areas: self-identity and global (in)justice. Muslim countries position themselves with increasing assertiveness in the international arena as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ nations. This is not because they are officially called ‘Islamic’ states—many are not³⁴—but because it denotes a comprehensive identity and newly assumed discourse. In addition, their discontentment with the international order is expressed as the claim for international justice as a typical Islamic value.

Self-Identity

A dominating streak in Muslim countries’ foreign policy discourse *vis-à-vis* the West is a posture of defiance.³⁵ The recent past of European colonization, combined with Western criticism for Muslim countries’ lack of democracy and human rights, has created much resentment in the Muslim world. Although it could be argued that much of this indignation can be attributed to

34) It is interesting to note that only Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania and Pakistan call themselves officially ‘Islamic republic’. Saudi Arabia, officially a kingdom, calls itself an ‘Arab Islamic state’ in article 1 of its 1992 Basic Law.

35) Bassam Tibi speaks of ‘defensive-cultural attitudes’ in his *The Crisis of Islam* (Salt Lake City UT: University of Utah Press, 1988), pp. 1–8.

self-victimization and the refusal of self-criticism, there is a clear and present perception among the Muslim world that the Western world is continuously reasserting its dominance, whether militarily, economically, politically, culturally or otherwise.

There seems to be more that separates the two ‘worlds’ or ‘civilizations’ than unites them. This separation is often expressed in terms of identity: ‘we’ are unlike ‘them’; Muslims are intrinsically different from Westerners. Research and surveys, however, show that there is a wide gap between self-identification and factual differences.

Identity as expressed by Muslim countries refers mostly to particular values relating to virtues and vices. Several worldwide research projects have shown that Muslims associate Westerners with being immoral, greedy and selfish³⁶—characteristics that are deemed typically Western and hence *not* Muslim. Vice versa, we see a similar characterization by Westerners of Muslims as being the opposites of Westerners, with qualifications of not democratic, not woman-friendly and not secular. These particular values that are attributed to ‘the other’ may reassert one’s sense of identity, especially when it is an identity that is perceived as completely different from the other.

An altogether different picture emerges, however, when Muslims and Westerners are not asked to identify each other, but themselves. They are then shown as sharing many political, moral and social values.³⁷ Arabs, for instance, rank highest on the world’s list of those who eagerly wish for democracy.³⁸ The fact that we see so little of it on the ground says much about local politics and Western support for non-democratic regimes in Muslim countries, as will be discussed below. But democracy, as such, is not a foreign notion to Muslims. Indeed, a recent worldwide survey among Muslims showed that the two issues favoured most by Muslims are

36) See, for example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project entitled ‘The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other’, 22 June 2006. An interesting observation made by this report is that Muslims living in the West view Westerners much more favourably. Also see the focus group research that was conducted by the US Council on Foreign Relations, ‘A New Beginning: Strategies for a More Fruitful Dialogue with the Muslim World’, May 2005.

37) Ronald Inglehart, ‘The Worldviews of Islamic Publics in Global Perspective’, in Mansoor Moaddel (ed.), *Worldviews of Islamic Publics* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

38) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* (quoting from the World Values survey) (New York: UNDP, 2003); Gallup World Poll, *Special Report: Muslim World—Islam and Democracy* (Princeton NJ: Gallup Organization, 2006), available online at <http://media.gallup.com/MuslimWestFacts/PDF/GALLUPMUSLIMSTUDIESIslamandDemocracy030607rev.pdf>; and John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).

democracy *and* shariah.³⁹ In addition, the same survey showed broad support for the equal rights of men and women,⁴⁰ and significant majorities in many Muslim countries wishing that their religious leaders played a less direct role in legislation or in deciding on public dress codes.⁴¹

Both sides maintain a fixation on their identities and values as opposed to the other. This shows when the West interprets the resentment harboured by many Muslims towards the West as hatred, in particular for Western values.⁴² Yet this is a false notion. The anti-Western sentiments that are harboured by many Muslims are not based on a hatred of Western values. Muslim anger towards the West is not because of who Westerners *are*, but because of what they *do*.⁴³

Western ‘doing’, however, is a mix of fact and fiction in Muslim minds that contributes to the commonly felt Muslim fear of the West ‘taking over’, not only politically, economically and militarily, but also culturally, morally and socially: clothing, music, literature and architecture are largely adopted from the West; Muslim countries appear to be mere pawns on the political chessboards that are played by Western powers; most Muslim countries are dependant on the global forces of finance and economics that are largely driven by Western powers; a successive series of military interventions in Muslim countries since the second half of the twentieth century only adds to the feeling that the imperialist times never ended; and Muslim countries are continuously criticized by the West for their lack of democracy, human rights and civil liberties.

While some Muslim resentment towards Western actions may be justified, the mixture of fact and fiction regarding the West’s ‘doing’ *vis-à-vis* the Muslim world has also led to a great measure of self-pity and self-

39) Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, pp. 47–48. This Gallup research was conducted between 2001 and 2007 in over 35 Muslim majority nations, sampling more than 90 per cent of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims.

40) Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, pp. 50–52. These equal rights include the same civil legal rights as men, the right to vote, the right to hold a job outside the home and the right to hold leadership positions at cabinet and national council levels.

41) Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, p. 49.

42) As voiced by former US President George W. Bush in his address to Congress of 20 September 2001: ‘They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. [...] They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other’; available online at <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/bush911c.html>.

43) See, for example, Edward P. Djerejian, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for US Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, a report by the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World (Washington DC: Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, 1 October 2003), available online at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/24882.pdf>; and Peter A. Furia and Russell E. Lucas, ‘Determinants of Arab Public Opinion on Foreign Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, 2006, pp. 585–605.

victimization among Muslims. This sentiment can be summarized by the words of former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamed: ‘We are all Muslims. We are all oppressed. We are all being humiliated’.⁴⁴

At the same time, however, Muslim governments and peoples are also themselves to blame. Western interference, whether military, economical or cultural, is rarely unilateral but often on invitation. People choose themselves what music they listen to and what to wear when they go to the nearest McDonald’s. What is bewildering for Western policy-makers, politicians and NGOs is that they are often entangled in a situation of ‘damned if you do and damned if you don’t’: Westerners are urged to come in and help with a call on their conscience as former colonial powers, but at the same time rebuffed with the accusation of behaving as neo-imperialists.

The factual truth of these claims and counter-claims is not in order here, for it is perception thereof that counts. And it is this perception of mutual exclusion based on values that is colouring the international discourse both ways.

Does religion play a role in this? Definitely, and especially on the Muslim side. The position of Muslim defiance and self-assertion has converged with the aforementioned Islamization of all discourses, leading to an all-encompassing identity of Islam as a authentic characteristic that is often juxtaposed to being Western. In terms of relations with the West, therefore, the issue at hand is not Islam as a religion *per se*, but Islam as an identity of being different, whether as a victim or as an opposition force.

However, in terms of action in the international arena, another picture emerges. For as we have seen so far, Muslim countries when pursuing their goals—regardless of whether they are typically ‘Islamic’ or not—do so in full conformity with the existing framework of international relations. This also applies to the identity of being different. In other words, the *expression* of being different is done in accordance with internationally accepted means of diplomacy and international law. The differences—whether authentic, perceived or assumed—are being played out in an international playground in accordance with its rules.

This is important for this discussion. For while Muslim countries may have goals and notions that can be radically different from those of Western countries, in pursuing these in international relations and diplomatic disputes, they generally play by the rules accepted by the international community.

It is therefore a sad sight when the identity of being different dominates in an otherwise mutually accepted framework of diplomacy. A particular case in point where the two identities clash is over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Darfur humanitarian disaster. For several years it has been a ritual in the UN Human Rights Council (formerly Commission) for Muslim states to

44) Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad at the opening of the tenth session of the summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference, 16 October 2003; for the full text, see online at <http://www.qern.org/node/183>.

rally unanimously in Sudan's defence *vis-à-vis* Western-backed resolutions against Sudan, and for Western states to rally in Israel's defence *vis-à-vis* any Muslim-backed resolutions against it. In doing so, both sides cancel out each other's resolutions that call for (often justified) condemnation of Sudan and Israel. Given the cost in human suffering in these two countries, the resulting stalemate is an affront to international politics.

Global Injustice

Perhaps the greatest worry among Muslim nations is their lack of faith in international justice. This is where Islam comes in strongly, for to Muslims their religion epitomizes the sense of justice.⁴⁵ Introducing Islam in international forums therefore mostly has little to do with specific Islamic models or institutions, but mostly simply with justice.

An illustration of this is the speeches of the ostentatiously religious Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad before the General Assembly of the United Nations. In each speech Ahmadinejad comes to a point where he emphasizes the importance of religion in international relations in order to obtain international justice.⁴⁶ Interestingly, he does so by avoiding words like 'Islam', 'Muslim', 'religion' or 'faith'. He actually does not take the position of a Muslim speaking on behalf of an Islamic republic, but as a member of the international community who argues for the introduction of ethical values—preferably monotheistic values—into international relations, so that the goals as set out by the United Nations can be reached: justice, freedom and human rights.⁴⁷

45) See, for example, M. Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002 [1984]), reviewed in *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1985. For an example of a modern view on this concept, see Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam* (North Haledon NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2000 [first published in Arabic in 1949]).

46) See, for example, the following speeches by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the General Assembly of the United Nations:

'It is essential that spirituality and ethics find their rightful place in international relations. Without ethics and spirituality, attained in light of the teachings of Divine prophets, justice, freedom and human rights cannot be guaranteed' (20 September 2006).

'Monotheism, justice and compassion for humans should dominate all the pillars of the UN and this organization should be a forum for justice, and every member should enjoy equal spiritual and legal support' (26 September 2007).

'Obeisance to God is of utmost importance to mankind' (22 September 2008).

47) In a similar vein, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah: 'This world is dead. Its humanity and values are dead. World leaders make speeches on human values, democratic values and human rights. This is paradoxical. The whole world talks about human values and democracy while tens of millions die of famine'; speech of 16 September 2008, available online at <http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/nasrallah-speaks-an-interesting-speech>, last accessed 10 February 2010.

To many Muslims, the sense of injustice in international relations is symbolized by the fate of the Palestinian people, especially the perceived use of double standards. Strictly upholding resolutions and international law when it comes to Muslim countries, but not when it involves Israel, is something of which all Muslims are sharply aware. Chris Patten, when EU Commissioner of External Relations, stated that ‘the treatment of Palestinians’ is one of the ‘major areas of policy where the approach we pursue in America and Europe could abate or exacerbate Arab hostility, and build rather than burn bridges between the West and the whole of the Islamic world’.⁴⁸

Muslims feel a similar Western use of double standards when it comes to democracy. Many Muslim countries and all Arab countries lack democratic systems, and these countries have been subject to Western policies aimed at democratic reform since the 1990s. The question is not for lack of want, however, for the surveys noted above show that Muslims, and Arabs in particular, are very favourable towards democracy. While the answer to this paradox has been sought in Arab and Muslim mindsets, such as an inert need for authoritarianism, or Islam itself, it has also been argued that Western powers’ unwillingness actually to allow for true democratic reform might be a key factor.⁴⁹ This point was confirmed by an unexpected source, namely US President George W. Bush, when he said in 2003:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did not make us safe [...] because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.⁵⁰

It was this observation that led the Bush administration to step up its efforts to make the Arab world more democratic—not necessarily for democracy *per se*, but to forestall the indirect effect of breeding more terrorism against the West as the ‘far enemy’. However, the ensuing pursuit of democracy in the ‘Greater Middle East’ became shipwrecked on the aftermaths of the wars in

48) Chris Patten, ‘Islam and the West: At the Crossroads’, speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, 24 May 2004, at <http://www.eurunion.org/news/press/2004/20040086.htm>. Other ‘major areas of policy’ that Patten mentioned were reform in the Arab world, Iraq and Turkish membership of the EU.

49) See, for example, Gary C. Gambill, ‘Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit, Part I’, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 2, February–March 2003; and Gary C. Gambill, ‘Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit, Part II: American Policy’, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 5, nos. 8–9, August–September 2003.

50) US President George W. Bush, speech of 6 November 2003 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, available online at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/11.06.03.html>.

Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and on the United States' failure to recognize Hamas after its landslide victory in 2006 in one of the rare free and fair elections in the Arab world.

So 'democracy', just like 'Israel', has become the focus point of Muslims' sense of global injustice, placing the blame on the Western discrepancy between principles and actions. As already mentioned, this is not necessarily a representation of the true state of world affairs—the Muslim states and peoples must also take much of the blame—but the resentment runs deep and is therefore to be taken into consideration if one wants to change Muslim–Western relationships.

Islam in International Relations

Based on this paper's findings regarding Islamic discourse and activism in international relations, the following conclusions may be drawn:

Islam Plays a Relatively Small Role in International Relations

Islam has gained dominance as the primary source of authoritative discourse and activism in the Muslim world. However, this mainly takes place within the confines of the domestic domain, and little of it is seen in the international arena. This concurs with what Robert Cooper stated in his maxim 'in the end, what matters is domestic politics', which he explains as: 'Today the primacy of the domestic sphere is evident in almost all countries. What keeps governments in power is politics at home, not foreign relations'.⁵¹

This is not to say that Islam does not play a role at all in international relations. It does, but in several specific arenas that were categorized in this paper under the headings of 'Islamic activism' and 'Islamic discourse'. While 'Islamic discourse' is concerned with larger issues of a metaphysical and psychological nature that were identified as Islamic identity and global injustice, 'Islamic activism' relates to more practical issues, of which four were identified: human rights; war and peace; Islamic finance; and the protection of Islam. Islamic activism and Islamic discourse are intertwined, of course, but for the purpose of analysis they have been discussed separately.

51) Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), pp. 102–103.

These findings are surprising given the general perception that Islam is a dominating factor in world politics. This leads us to three observations. First, most issues in international relations involving Muslim countries involve not typical 'Islamic issues' but practical interests and power politics. Second, there is a Western tendency to 'Islamize' foreign politics and policies of Muslim countries—that is, to identify them as 'Islamic' by virtue of stemming from 'Islamic countries'. Third, while Islam may be very important for Muslim self-identity (and therefore sometimes even be a catalysing factor of conflict), it is questionable whether it plays any role at all in *solving* international disputes, since these revolve ultimately around practical matters.

International Relations as Common Civic Civilization

With regard to issues in the international arena where Islam does play a role in the form of discourse or activism, the following conclusion can be drawn: the pursuit by Muslim nations or organizations of the typical 'Islamic' issues almost always comply with the diplomatic and legal rules and mechanisms that have been developed in the international domain (with al-Qaeda as the main exception).

Moreover, Muslim countries may complain about the functioning of the present international order itself, with its institutions, principles and rules, which are based on an unequal distribution of wealth and power between old and emerging nations, but they have never seriously challenged it, let alone on Islamic grounds. It is as if Muslim countries are complaining about Western driving abilities, writhing and wrestling to get to the driver's seat, or to be allowed to read the map and give directions, but they never leave the car for alternative transportation. Libya tried! But unsuccessfully.

Indeed, global surveys have repeatedly shown unity in Western and Muslim views on larger political concepts—such as democracy—but also on societal and moral issues. One major exception is the issue of human rights, which is often criticized for being Western-centred. And although this criticism often appears to be politically motivated (that is, the West should not dictate what Muslims should do), the Muslim world shares this criticism with many other non-Western nations.⁵²

While relations between the Muslim and Western worlds are commonly seen as a conflict, the unanimous recognition of an international order with institutions, rules and traditions is remarkable. It constitutes, in fact, a common civic civilization of unique historical proportions.

52) Much has been written on this subject. For a concise overview, see J. Donnelly, 'Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytical Critique of Non-Western Conceptions of Human Rights', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 76, no. 2, 1982, pp. 303–316.

'Islamization'

The foregoing may seem contradictory to Islam's dominance in the international arenas as a force that differentiates between the Western and Muslim worlds. It is this paper's contention, however, that many—if not most—issues at hand are being 'Islamized'—that is, brought within the realm of Islamic logic and discourse.

The motivation for Islamization is criticism of the dysfunctional moral, societal, political and legal structures of contemporary Muslim societies, which is blamed on the absence of proper Islamic values. Islam has therefore become a dominating discourse in the Muslim world, albeit mostly restricted to the domestic arena. The process of Islamization may be founded on genuine convictions and sound theological reasoning, but often also shows artificial and political elements—declaring something contrary to, or in conformity with, Islam may very well serve personal or political interests. This is in itself one of the great disputes that is taking place within the Muslim world.

Islamization is also taking place with regard to the topics discussed in this paper. In this respect three different ways of Islamization can be distinguished. First, a model that exists in classical Islamic doctrine may be *adopted* by contemporary Muslim societies. Examples are the introduction by some Muslim countries of Islamic dress code or criminal law.

Second, present-day existing rules or models in Muslim societies may be *adapted* to Islamic classical models. This is the case with most issues mentioned in this paper, such as the 'Islamic' state, 'Islamic' democracy, 'Islamic' economics and 'Islamic' human rights: they are typical modern concepts that, as such, do not exist in Islamic theological or legal doctrine, but are somehow put in an Islamic frame.

Third, present-day existing rules or models can be declared *compatible* with Islam. Rather than declaring a rule to be a rule of Islamic law (shariah), it is declared not to violate Islamic law, which ultimately amounts to the same. An example is Egypt, where the government has taken the position that the Egyptian legal system, which is largely based on European laws, is not in violation of Islamic law with the exception of only a few rules. A similar implicit reasoning applies to international relations and international law: since their mechanics are not different from or contrary to Islamic law, they are considered compatible with Islamic law. With this logic, everything that is not explicitly Islamic, either by adoption or adaptation, is brought within the realm of Islam and given the label of Islamic authenticity.

The Clash that Remains

Regardless of the unity between the Muslim and Western worlds in terms of international concepts, rules and relations, the overriding atmosphere

between the two worlds is one of conflict: the West forcefully pushes the agenda of good governance, democracy and human rights, while the Muslim side reacts with a mixture of defiance and self-victimization.

Islamic discourse, in particular when related to self-identity and global injustice, is the domain where the differences between the Muslim and Western worlds are being played out, regardless of whether these differences are factual or simply perceived as such. Two issues where this discourse focuses on are the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and democracy.

This posture of defiance is also translated in the practical issues of what we have called Islamic activism. Human rights, economics, war and peace and the protection of religion as a sacred value are by themselves not necessarily different from ‘Western’ standards or traditions, but they are more often than not ‘Islamized’—that is, they are dislodged from their alleged Western ‘ownership’ and appropriated by the Muslim world, merely by attributing them with Islamic authenticity.

Western Responses

Religion in Western Foreign Policies

The Western world, and in particular Western Europe, is coming to terms with the fact that a religious resurgence is not limited to the Muslim world, but is taking place on a worldwide scale. Examples abound and are well recorded: the immense popularity of Pentecostalism in Africa, South America and Asia; the popularity of being 'born again' among Christians (in particular Americans), but also among Muslims, Jews and Hindus; and the return of religion in an officially atheist country like China.⁵³ But most importantly, religion is returning to public life 'almost everywhere you look'.⁵⁴

To some observers, this is not so much a resurgence of religiosity but the Western secular eye finally opening to the reality of a religious presence that never went away.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, a brief overview of the twentieth century

53) Brian Grim, 'Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics', report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Washington DC: Pew Forum, 2 May 2008), available online at <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=301>.

54) See, for example, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), p. 12.

55) 'The world today, with some exceptions [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was', argues Peter Berger in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1999), p. 2. For a similar argument, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 17ff.

definitely shows religious shifts in social and political landscapes all over the world.⁵⁶

Why religion is ‘returning’ or ‘reawakening’ is still a matter of debate, but it is clear now that the secularization thesis—that religion will disappear with the coming of modernity—has proven false: the modes that religions have found to manifest themselves have no problem with modernity but, to the contrary, appear to be a result thereof.⁵⁷ The discourse on typical modern issues like democracy, human rights, climate and the environment, and technological development, which used to be dominated by secularists, is conducted with equal ease by the new generation of believers.⁵⁸ Some even claim that religious traditions, more than secularism, ‘appear to be on the side of human enlightenment’.⁵⁹

Scholars writing on international relations have also picked up the role of religion, as shown by the recent literature that abounds on the subject.⁶⁰ But most of this literature does not go beyond the descriptions mentioned above. Merely noticing the worldwide resurgence of religiosity and the role of religion in politics is not sufficient when discussing religion’s role in international relations, especially when most of these developments relate to the domestic domain.

To what extent, then, does religion spill over into the international domain when it is so important in the domestic area? It appears that very few, if any, Western countries push religious agendas in the international arena (an

56) See, for example, P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). This phenomenon is further substantiated by research and polling institutions like the Pew Forum, Gallup Poll, and World Values Survey.

57) Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back: ‘The great forces of modernity—technology and democracy, choice and freedom—are all strengthening religion rather than undermining it’*, p. 355.

58) Jennifer Butler, *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized* (London: Pluto Press, 2006). In Nazir Ayyubi, *Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 1991), Ayyubi already referred to this modernity of Islamists: ‘The Islamic militants are not angry because the aeroplane has replaced the camel; they are angry because they could not get on to the aeroplane’, pp. 176–177.

59) Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 1994: ‘Religious traditions are now confronting the differentiated secular spheres, challenging them to face their own obscurantist, ideological, and inauthentic claims. In many of these confrontations, it is religion which, as often as not, appears to be on the side of human enlightenment’, p. 234.

60) To name a few, Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion* (London: Longman, 2007); Eric C. Owens, *The Sacred and the Sovereign: Religion and International Politics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003); Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopolous, *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

exception is perhaps the Vatican). In the United States, a country where religion is very prevalent in the domestic domain, former US President George W. Bush may have used religiously inspired terminology like ‘axis of evil’ (reminiscent of Reagan’s ‘empire of evil’) and ‘crusade against terror’, and US President Barack Obama may invoke religious discourse in addressing ‘the Muslim world’, but these examples are exceptions, not the rule. Indeed, contrary to what many may think, religion is neither an instrument nor content of American foreign policy.⁶¹

The question of how to deal with religious issues in an international context has become pertinent in Western development aid. While it has been recognized that ‘culture’ is a factor to be taken into account when pursuing development activities abroad, religion is increasingly recognized as equally important. The approach to this new factor in development aid often depends on the donor’s position on religion: the United States has no scruples about initiating large-scale training projects for imams in Bangladesh, for instance,⁶² while Western European embassies in Bangladesh are mostly reluctant about such activities because of the religious factor.⁶³

Development aid is particularly sensitive when it comes to Islam.⁶⁴ It is in this field that most Western countries have their hands-on experience with issues related to Islam. However, the discussion here focuses on another aspect of Western–Muslim relations, namely that of inter-state interaction that takes place in international forums and precipitates into the mutual image-making of Muslim and Western societies and policies.

Dealing with Islam

The Western secular or non-committal position in relation to religion in the international domain, on the one hand, and Muslim embracement of Islamic discourse and identity on the other hand, often leaves the Western world in a position of reaction rather than action. And the reaction is most of the time not a response to the (Islamic) argument of the other, but a restatement of one’s position. It is like two deaf people arguing.

This is not that strange from the West’s perspective, for the West lacks a discourse on religion in international relations. For that reason it fails to

61) Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, pp. 357–359; and Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

62) USAID/Asia Foundation training of 2,500 imams in issues of development aid (ranging from dairy farming and forestry to elections) in 2005–2006.

63) Related to the author by several Dutch, Danish and English embassies and institutions in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2006.

64) See M.S. Berger, *Religion and Development Aid: The Special Case of Islam*, Clingendael Diplomacy Paper no. 8 (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2006).

understand the Islamic argument.⁶⁵ The Muslim side, on the other hand, has the advantage, for it has mastered both Islamic and Western discourses, mainly because its diplomats have received their education in both worlds.

A strong Islamic identity combined with a dominant Islamic discourse in domestic issues is a forceful source of power, and may leave Western diplomats, politicians and government officials literally speechless. Should they then master the religious discourse in order to engage with their Muslim opponents? This would seem very artificial and will probably prove to be counter-productive. For religion is by definition based on convictions, and those cannot be acquired as if learning a language. Religion and its discourse pertain to the exclusive domain of the believer. Outsiders (non-believers, to use a negative qualification in religious parlance) will not be able, and not even be allowed, to enter. So do not even try. To be drawn into a discourse that is not one's own means a start on the wrong footing.

In order to engage with the Muslim world, and especially the Islamic discourse, Westerners should therefore turn to content. For as was mentioned earlier, the Muslim world judges the Western world not for what it is, but what it does. Regardless of how Islamic an identity the Muslim world takes on, in its relations with the rest of the world it is focused primarily on concrete results. This is where a window of opportunity presents itself. Westerners confronted with so-called 'Islamic issues' should master two abilities: unwrapping the 'Islamic' message; and deconstructing their own message.

The ability to unwrap is that one can see beyond the Islamic discourse. This paper has shown that in most cases Islam is in itself not the central issue, but the discourse that envelops the truly important matters. Even the matter of protecting Islam against insults and attacks is not a case of Islam itself but the confrontation between belief systems and (secular) criticism. Unwrapping the Islamic message means that one is to look at the goals that are being pursued by the other side, without being sidetracked by the Islamic rhetoric that accompanies it. If these goals are understandable or even reasonable, they may pose possibilities for common ground.

Deconstruction is the ability to dismantle ideologically loaded terms such as 'democracy' and 'human rights' into packages that are understandable—and therefore acceptable—to Muslim counterparts. The reason for doing so is that in most Muslim minds these terms have become typical Western products to be force-fed to Muslim countries. But if one were to dismantle 'democracy' into neutrally sounding building blocks such as 'elections', 'representation', 'freedom of opinion' and 'freedom of assembly', one could

65) For an analysis of this failure, see Elizabeth S. Hurd, 'Political Islam and Foreign Policy in Europe and the United States', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, no. 3, 2007, pp. 345–367; and Paul Sharp, chapter 12 entitled 'Crazy Religion Diplomacy', in his *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, no. 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

probably discuss these issues much more openly and easily. Indeed, one would find that these are political constructs to which Muslims worldwide aspire. The same can be said for human rights.

Part of the unwrapping and deconstructing process is the willingness to ask Muslim counterparts what they actually want and mean. If they use Islamic discourse to dismiss democracy, or to justify preference for an Islamic state, one needs to probe with questions: why and, more importantly, how? No energy should be wasted on the argument that Islam, the Koran or the Prophet demands an Islamic state, but one should enquire into the practical details of that state. For that is the only way to find out whether the counterpart is advocating a completely new kind of state (the adopted model) or a hybrid state with both Islamic and Western features (the adaptation model) or whether he is arguing for a state that is perfectly acceptable for Western standards but is insisting on calling it an Islamic state (the compatibility model). And only then can one start off on the right footing.

The religious discourse of Islam should not be avoided in international relations, but the West should definitely not be drawn into it. In short, 'talk to them but don't talk their talk'. The present focus on Islam is disruptive to true international understanding.

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