

Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics: Three Debates that Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT *This article argues that a post-orientalist discourse has emerged over the past few decades to challenge the dominance of orientalism on Western foreign policy thinking towards Islam and the Muslim world. The paper examines the geostrategic thinking of Bernard Lewis, Edward Said, and John Esposito, and their impact on Western perceptions of Islam. The paper submits that while Edward Said exposed the prejudice inherent in orientalist thought, it was John Esposito and a cohort of post-orientalist scholars who engaged in three critical debates with the orientalist to provide a more authentic vision of Islam and a more nuanced picture of the politics of the Muslim world. The paper however concedes that while post-orientalism has triumphed in the academic setting, the orientalist perspective still dominates the policy sphere and continues to shape American foreign policy.*

Keywords: Orientalism, Islam, Democracy, U.S. Foreign Policy

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The study of Islam in the West has gone through several transformations, often driven by geopolitical imperatives. As the Islamic faith emerged out of the Arabian Peninsula and expanded westward, the military and cultural encounters with the Byzantine Empire were already leading to the emergence of an image of Islam as a religious challenge to Christianity, as a cultural challenge to Europe, and as a geopolitical challenge to Christendom. The encounters with Christianity and Christendom also had an impact on Muslim thinking, not just about 'others,' but also about Islam and the Muslim world. Early Muslims thought of themselves as a faith community.¹ As they encountered established empires and engaged with them politically and militarily, later Muslims started to think of their community as a polity and also, as an empire, and competed with other empires based on this new self-perception. As the encounters became more frequent, more intense and sometimes bloody, thinkers in both Christian and Muslim communities started producing discourses that shaped the identities of the self and the other; both began to construct and reconstruct the other through these narratives.² Since the 18th century, European nations became more dominant globally and their languages (English and French) started dominating global literature and then global media. Consequently, their narratives about Islam and Muslims and the Muslim world became dominant narratives, even shaping how Muslims themselves think and talk about their own history, religion and identity.³

For the past two centuries, how Islam was spoken and written about in the West was how Islam was spoken and written about globally in Western languages. Therefore, Western narratives of Islam and Muslims deserve critical examination. If global perceptions of Muslim realities have to change, Western discourses on Islam must be scrutinized and deconstructed. In the past few decades we have witnessed the emergence of just such a trend in the study of Islam. A growing academy of scholars have emerged who can only be described as post-orientalists,⁴ who are challenging the dominant stereotypes of Islam and Muslims extant in the literature. Now narratives about Islam have created the space, the battlefield, where ideas, identities, ideologies, global norms and geopolitics are vigorously contested. Today at academic conferences, in the op-ed pages of major newspapers, on talk shows, blogs, and social media, what is Islam (progressive, liberal, conservative, moderate, radical, Sunni, Shia, etc.), who is a Muslim, what has the West done to Islam and what is Islam doing to the West are debated regularly. The global conversation about Islam continues to rage across ever-expanding media. At the risk of simplifying a very complex discursive revolution, I would like to submit that a great deal of credit for opening the door to this contestation goes to Edward Said and John L. Esposito, two Western Christian scholars, who identified, exposed, and rebutted what we now know as *Orientalism*.

In this paper, I will show how John Esposito's scholarship compliments Said's work. In fact, I will claim that Esposito completes the journey of the discovery

of Islam that began with Said's *Orientalism* and his subsequent book *Covering Islam*.⁵ To a great extent Edward Said only tells us what Islam is not; that is, the Islam of Orientalist imaginary is not the real Islam but a fiction Orientalists created through discourses of power. But he does not introduce us to an Islam that exists outside or independent of Orientalist narratives -dare I say the 'real Islams' diverse Muslim practices in diverse societies. John L. Esposito and a cohort of post-orientalist scholars through their scholarship and academic activism introduced first to Western and then to global audiences, understandings of Islam that rely on Islamic sources, are recognizable to Muslims themselves and, in the process, undermined Orientalist discourses. In this paper by identifying and unraveling three debates between orientalists and post-orientalists I show how Islamic studies is being transformed and what its impact is on U.S. and western policies towards Islam and the Muslim world.

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The Impact of Said's *Orientalism*

Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), conceptualized and articulated what traditional and modern Muslim scholars had been saying consistently but incoherently about Western scholarship of Islam: that it was frequently biased, hostile, and motivated not by a desire to understand Islam and Muslims but a desire to deny Islam as an authentic faith and present Muslims as a barbaric people.⁶ Muslim intellectuals like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in the mid-19th century, and Maulana Mawdūdī and Ali Miya Nadwi in the early 20th century, among many others, made many efforts to correct Western misrepresentations of Islam.⁷ All over the Muslim world, intellectuals and scholars, especially those living in societies colonized by European nations, have tried to combat the growing misrepresentation of Islam by European scholars. Said, relying on French philosopher Michel Foucault's work on the nexus between knowledge and power, captured these concerns in a succinct way and with sufficient felicity to not only trigger a debate in the literary academy but also across disciplines.

In order to understand what Said achieved through his now classic *Orientalism* we need to understand the postmodern turn that was taking the humanities by storm in the 1970s. French intellectuals such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida were revolutionizing the study of language, philosophy, and humanities via an epistemic revolution that Lyotard called "the postmodern condition." Lyotard described the post-

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modern condition as “an incredulity toward metanarrative.” These three radical philosophers advocated a healthy skepticism toward grand narratives and knowledge claims. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is one of the earliest deployments of postmodern assumptions and methods to the study of scholarship on ‘the East,’ especially on discourses about Islam and the Middle East. Foucault’s work in

particular underpins the epistemological and methodological foundations of *Orientalism*.⁸

Foucault’s work involves exposing the workings of power in the production of knowledge. He makes a strong case that modern subjectivities and knowledge that is produced by modern academies is done so in the service of power. In reality knowledge rather than becoming a source of liberation, and empowerment becomes the opposite, oppressive and disciplinary. Knowledge, Foucault argues, is an effect of power.⁹ Production of knowledge becomes a way of exercising power over the individual and society that is studied. Said employs these Foucauldian ideas masterfully to show how Orientalists became experts of the Orient and produced through their discourse two things. The first is an imaginary Orient that, while seemingly a product of an attempt to understand ‘the other,’ actually produces an imaginary and superior Occident. Second, they produced an *episteme* that Said labels Orientalism, that produces both experts and knowledge modalities and methodologies that perpetuate the imaginary Orient necessary for sustaining the dominance of the Occident. This is what Said has to say about Orientalism as a discourse, as an organized activity. In his words:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse, as described by him in *The Archeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting, on the Orient, could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.¹⁰

This short section from Said lays out his basic contentions about the knowledge produced in the West about the East. It is institutionalized, politically motivated, and in the service of political power exercised over the East in forms of military action, occupation, colonization, and settlement. His basic contention is that the knowledge and power nexus as described by Foucault and the concept of discourse best comprehends Western interest in the East, as primarily political and motivated by a desire to dominate the region.

Said's framing of Western knowledge as a discourse of power provides new ways of understanding European colonization and imperial policies; in ways other than purely materialistic or economic. While Marxist and mercantilist explanations of imperialism and colonialism rely on political economy as a basis to understand Western desire to dominate natural resource-rich Asia and Africa,¹¹ Said's theory of Orientalism opens the door to a political culture approach to imperialism.¹² The sinister and malevolent designs behind imperialism cannot be denied by arguing, for example as some have done, that some colonial projects actually cost more in blood and treasure than they produced in profit for the colonial power, when the ideational and cultural imperatives behind colonization are understood.¹³

While the Orient includes all of Asia, in this paper I am concerned with only the so-called Muslim world – societies and areas where large Muslim populations have lived and thrived for long periods of time, meaning North Africa, Central and South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Regarding Islam and Arabs, Said draws the following conclusions about the discourse produced by Western scholars. He says it is inherently political in its content and motivation. The discourse is designed to construct a world of Islam that is backward, irrational, violent, undemocratic and underdeveloped.¹⁴ Said reserves his most stringent criticism for the work of Bernard Lewis, who is a renowned historian of Islam and the Middle East, with special expertise on the Ottoman Empire. While discussing his work, Said emphasizes how authoritative scholars are raised on pedestals from which whatever they say and write, whether valid or not, polemical or analytical, profound or superficial, is deemed as authoritative and learned.¹⁵ Said's rather brutal analysis of Lewis' scholarship is summarized in these two short quotes from *Orientalism*:

Lewis' is polemical, not scholarly, purpose is to show here and elsewhere that Islam is an anti-Semitic ideology, not merely a religion. He has a little logical difficulty in trying to assert that Islam is a fearful mass phenomenon and at the same time 'not genuinely popular.'

He goes on to proclaim that Islam is an irrational herd or mass phenomenon ruling Muslims by passions, instincts, and unreflecting hatred. The whole point of his exposition is to frighten his audience, to make it never yield an inch to



Protests in Washington D.C. against President Donald Trump's ban on travelers from predominantly Muslim countries, June 26, 2018. MANDEL NGAN / AFP via Getty Images

Islam. According to Lewis, Islam does not develop, and neither do Muslims; they merely are and they are to be watched on account of that pure essence of theirs (according to Lewis), which happens to include a long-standing hatred of Christians and Jews. ... The core of Lewis' ideology about Islam is that it never changes and his whole mission is now to inform conservative segments of the Jewish reading public, and anyone who cares to listen, to any political historical and scholarly account of Muslims must begin and end with the fact that Muslims are Muslims.¹⁶

Bernard Lewis produced the tropes that shape contemporary Western, especially American, policymakers' approach to Islam and the Middle East. After the collapse of the Soviet Union support for Israel was justified on the grounds that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. This justification for a policy that uncritically supported war, systematic violation of Palestinian human rights, steady and relentless dispossession of Palestinian lands and properties and tolerance for illegal settlements, is based on Lewis's claim that Islam and democracy are incompatible. His claim that Islam and modernity are incompatible blithely attributes relative economic and political underdevelopment of the Muslim world to Muslim adherence to Islamic values. His explanation ignores the debilitating consequences of colonialism. He also provides the political and intellectual parameters which neoconservatives in the U.S. used to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Edward Said did a great job of exposing the dangerous consequences of Lewis's scholarship on Islam, to the Muslim world.

Lewis sees the history of Islam as characterized by struggle, first between Islam and Christianity and then between Islam and the contemporary West

John L. Esposito and scholars mentored or inspired by him, the post-orientalists, have engaged with Bernard Lewis and his discourse and are slowly deconstructing and dismantling it.¹⁷ In the rest of this paper I will elaborate upon three debates that constitute post-orientalists' engagement with Lewis' Orientalist legacy. The three debates are about these themes: (i) the thesis of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, (ii) the question of Islam's compatibility with modernity as played out in the debate on Islam's compatibility with democracy, and (iii) on U.S. policy towards manifestations of political Islam.¹⁸ Before I discuss the debates themselves, let me disclose that I locate myself firmly in the post-orientalist camp. In my dual role as an American academic and a Muslim intellectual, I too, have participated in these debates. I would like to believe that I have provided philosophical depth to Muslim understanding of modernity¹⁹ and contributed to the political theory of Islamic democracy.²⁰

The First Debate: Islam and the Clash of Civilizations

Bernard Lewis' rendition of Islam is shaped by his view of history. Lewis sees the history of Islam as characterized by struggle, first between Islam and Christianity and then between Islam and the contemporary West. This is his grand narrative; history is a struggle for political, economic and cultural domination between Islamic empires and their successors (modern Middle Eastern nations, Arabs, Turks, and Persians) and Christendom and its successors (the modern West, America, Europe, and Israel). Lewis describes these successors to Christendom as "Europe and its daughters." Lewis does advance caveats acknowledging historical and real contemporary differences within Muslim societies, usually at the beginning of his discourse, and then proceeds to ignore them and constructs a masterful grand narrative about all of Islam and all Muslims in terms of random and disparate observations across time and space to build his imaginary modern Islamic civilization. Lewis' Islamic civilization is like a former champion athlete who was once great, but is now old and tired and decrepit, struggling to adapt to the new rules of the game (modernity) watching with envy and hatred as its nemesis (Christianity) adapts to the new rules, even invents them, and in its new avatar (the West) reigns as the world champion. These emotions, envy and hatred toward the West for its success compared with Islam's alleged failures are then used by Lewis to explain Islamic politics and the political realities of the Muslim world.

Books with titles such as *Islam and the West*, and articles that spoke of the Muslim revolt and return, clearly indicate how Lewis over decades nurtured the idea of the Islamic threat and the coming clash of civilizations

Samuel P. Huntington's essay in *Foreign Affairs* made the 'Clash of Civilizations' theme a major organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially during the first term of George W. Bush's presidency and its 'global war on terror.'²¹ Huntington along with Lewis dominated the way the Bush Administration thought about Islam. Lewis's student, Near East specialist Martin Kramer, reveals how President Bush was spotted in the White House carrying a marked article written by Lewis.²² Huntington's essay effectively replaced the threat of communism to the West with the threat

of Islam, justifying the continued existence of NATO and providing a strategic reason for the West to remain united and militarily prepared. As noted above, the idea also played a part in the discourse that justified the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in the aftermath of the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001.

Huntington's article was published in 1993 but the idea was originally planted by Lewis and disseminated by Huntington. Lewis had been writing about the idea of the West and Islam as two distinct and incompatible civilizations for decades. Books with titles such as *Islam and the West*, and articles that spoke of the Muslim revolt and return, clearly indicate how Lewis over decades nurtured the idea of the Islamic threat and the coming clash of civilizations.²³ Martin Kramer acknowledged this in the obituary that he wrote on Bernard Lewis' death in *Foreign Affairs*.²⁴

Lewis's career extended over six decades. During this time, he not only established himself as the prominent expert on Islam, diagnosing and interpreting Islamic motives and feelings toward the West, but also through constant repetition of the same motifs, shaped how Western media, academia and policy makers thought of Islam and Muslims. Not just an Orientalist, dedicated and focused on linguistic and textual study of foreign cultures,²⁵ Lewis was a public intellectual. He wrote popular books, he wrote in prominent journals and magazines, frequently gave media interviews and, was always available to policy makers. It was clear that Lewis was not only molding the Western academic study of Islam but was also actively molding Western cultural attitudes, geopolitical visions and foreign policies toward Islam and Muslims.²⁶ Lewis not only planted the idea but carefully, over decades, nurtured the idea that a civilizational clash between Islam and the West was inevitable.

John Esposito took on the clash of civilizations discourse even before Huntington published his famous thesis. In his most cited book, *The Islamic Threat:*

Myth or Reality, Esposito debunks the clash of civilizations thesis and argues that the growing fervor for Islam in the Muslim world, the phenomenon that was triggering the fear of a civilizational clash, was not inherently anti-West, anti-America, or anti-democracy.²⁷ He systematically deconstructs the essentialization of Islam and shows that Islamic revival was a social and religious phenomenon and not necessarily a political one. Without underestimating the significance of political Islam, Esposito distinguishes between cultural and religious revival and the revivalist politics of Islamic movements. This was the first major effort by a Western scholar to show systematic nuance in parsing the differences among various Muslim regimes, Islamic movements, and Islamic states. Esposito critiques voices in the West that seemed to rely on stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs to advocate a militant and aggressive foreign policy that supported authoritarianism and undermined, even blocked, democratization. He warns against a foreign policy that was sure to prove counterproductive by advocating conflict rather than cooperation.²⁸

Unlike Edward Said, Esposito moves beyond critiquing the Orientalist discourse; he explains the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism within its own context and parameters, and allows Muslims at the forefront of that phenomenon to express, in their own words, what their cultural and political aspirations were. The biggest difference between Orientalists like Lewis and post-Orientalist scholars like Esposito is that the latter allowed authentic and native voices to speak for themselves and their culture. Orientalists acted as gatekeepers to the Orient, allowing the West to see only what they wanted it to see. Post-orientalists like John Esposito not only interpreted Islam but also provided Muslims the opportunity to partake in the Western discourse on Islam. In books like *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (1983), Esposito provides a forum for Islamic revivalists, and in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic World* he provides space for established and emerging Muslim scholars to speak about their religious heritage.²⁹ This is the most powerful way to deconstruct Orientalism: letting the Orient speak for itself making the discipline itself redundant. It is here that post-orientalists go beyond Edward Said.

Esposito challenged the clash of civilizations discourse at multiple levels. As discussed above, he engaged with its international and geopolitical implications. But he also deconstructed the idea of Islam and the West as two distinct and discrete entities by producing scholarship on the presence of Islam in the West, particularly in America.³⁰ The growing and vibrant Muslim presence in America not only undermined the idea of Islam and the West as separate entities but also debunked the notion that Western values and Islamic values were incompatible. Muslims were thriving in America and practicing their faith with just as much, if not more, dedication than in the Muslim world. This was possible only because Islam was compatible with the modern, liberal, and democratic culture of America.³¹ Esposito at one point or another served on

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the board of many prominent Muslim organizations, a degree of trust and respect Lewis and his fellow Orientalists have never earned. Many American Muslims view the Orientalist discourse as a source of Islamophobia and Esposito's scholarship as representative and authentic. He has been a leader in the academy as well as in the public sphere.

Bernard Lewis portrayed Muslims as belonging to an exotic anachronistic culture "out there" which was becoming increasingly hostile. Indeed, his use of terms such as rebellion and revolt suggested that he expected Muslims to accept Western hegemony, and somehow their opposition made them sinister and exposed something evil in their faith.³² Esposito, on the other hand, not only exposed the prejudice and injustices in Western policies toward Muslim nations and societies but also presented them not as a culture "out there" but as a community "right here." Through his work on Islamophobia,³³ a topic that Lewis felt no need to address, Esposito is also exposing how the othering of Muslims by Orientalists is enabling unjust cultural and political practices against Muslims in the West. In Lewis's work the clash of civilizations is inevitable and primarily because of the idiosyncrasies of Islam. Whereas in Esposito's work the clash of civilizations is avoidable if bad Western policies toward Islam and Muslims are rectified. Esposito has done an admirable job of providing a counter discourse but that does not mean that Lewis's impact and influence has diminished. A quick review of the foreign policy of the Trump Administration, its rhetoric about 'the Muslim ban,' its relentless gifts to Israel and complete isolation of Palestinians, will show that the foreign policy that emanates from the clash of civilizations paradigm still informs U.S. policy preferences.³⁴ In a recent article, Jeffery Haynes captures the pervasive impact of Lewis and his civilizational warriors:

... the success of an ideologically focused political argument, one that has deliberately exaggerated the extent of values-based incompatibility between all Muslims and all 'Westerners.' This was exhibited by Donald Trump and other leading Republicans in the 2016 presidential campaign, who sought to highlight the perceived virtues of American 'Judeo-Christianity' while implicitly or explicitly denigrating the values and ethics of Muslims, both in America and around the world.³⁵

But in the early days of the Barack Obama Administration, it was obvious that policy makers were listening to Esposito and his post-orientalist colleagues. The debate about how the West should approach the Muslim world still con-

tinues, but now because of the emergence of post-orientalists at least there is a debate.

The Second Debate: The Compatibility of Islam and Democracy

“The question, therefore, is not whether liberal democracy is compatible with Islamic fundamentalism—clearly it is not—but whether it is compatible with Islam itself.” – Bernard Lewis³⁶

No matter what aspect of Islam he wrote about, Lewis invariably took the conversation toward the civilizational dichotomy of Islam and the West and eventually discussed them in terms of geopolitical dominance and the inevitable clash between Islam and the West. Even his exploration of the question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible starts with a reference to military victories by the West over Islam: Austrians over Turks in 1683, and Israel over Arabs in 1948 and 1967.³⁷ Reading Lewis and the neo-orientalists who engaged in this debate on his side like Martin Kramer and Daniel Pipes, one gets a distinct awareness that the debate about Islam and democracy is more about the geopolitical implications of the Arab-Israeli conflict than about Islam or democracy. Lewis and his allies supported and advocated Western assistance to authoritarian regimes of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and monarchies in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf. They then turned around and blamed this proliferation of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East on Islam. The analysis of the Muslim world and Islam by Lewis and those influenced by him assumes, rather than concludes, the incompatibility of Islam and democracy and in a way recommends perpetual domination of the Islamic world by the West.³⁸ They consider only those aspects of Islamic discourse that illustrate the divergence of an essentialized, monolithic Islam with democracy, modernity, and the West, while those that suggest convergence are simply ignored. They cite selective statements made by Muslim leaders or ideologues and refer to selective episodes from history to make their case.

These selected statements support the argument that (i) Islam is about imposing *shariah*, (ii) the goal of the Islamic state is to wage *jihad* against internal and external enemies of Islam, and (iii) Islam is against democracy. Lewis also insists that because “God is always sovereign” in an Islamic state, Islam is also incompatible with secularism. Pipes, on the other hand, recognizes that the issue of secularism is tricky since it impacts Israel, which claims to be a Jewish state, and so he departs from Lewis on the necessity and virtues of secularism. In a debate on Islam and democracy with Muqtedar Khan, Pipes claimed that secularism is not necessary to have a fully functioning democracy and cites the example of the UK and Israel as democracies with state religions.³⁹ Unlike Es-

posito, who primarily writes books, gives public lectures and participates in academic conferences, Lewis and his fellow modern Orientalists, like Pipes and Kramer, wrote frequently in influential policy magazines like *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The National Interest*, and *The Commentary*, and hence had a greater impact on policy. John Esposito and post-orientalists have had a bigger impact on the academy. This partial success of the two epistemic communities has also created a chasm between the academia and the policy world.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that a democracy deficit exists in many Muslim-majority countries. But there are significant examples of functioning and aspiring democracies. John Esposito, in collaboration with John Voll, James Piscatori, Tamara Sonn, and other scholars, provides clear evidence of the compatibility of Islamic theories of governance and democracy, as well as examples of Muslim-majority countries that, in spite of colonialism, imperialism, and continued foreign interventions that impede democratization, are moving toward democracy.⁴¹ They also place the claims of anti-democratic Islamists such as those who serve as the main source for arguments by Lewis and his followers, within the broader context of Muslim thinkers, including those who argue in favor of democracy. Esposito and Voll cite statements and theories by Maulana Mawdūdī, the founder of the South Asia-based global Islamic movement *Jamaat-e-Islami*, and of Rashid Ghannoushi of the Muslim Brotherhood of Tunisia as evidence.

If by democracy is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, in which there is an alternation of power, as well as all freedoms and human rights for the public, then Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interests to do so.⁴²

By using quotes from known and prominent Islamists, they make the case for the both Islam's and Islamists' compatibility with democracy.



Anti-war demonstrators in Madrid hold a banner reading in Spanish “neither dictator nor imperialism,” calling for an end to the war in Libya, March 26, 2011.

DOMINIQUE FAGET / AFP via Getty Images

In an article published in the *Middle East Quarterly*, Esposito and Voll make the case that the religion of Islam is compatible with democracy by pointing out the Islamic concepts that either are conducive to democracy or can lead to Islamic democracy. They discuss *al-tawhid*, the oneness of God that makes God sovereign over all. This idea makes all people equal; none is or can be the master of another thus leading

to equality, an idea necessary for democracy. Belief in *al-tawhid* is necessary for a Muslim to be a Muslim. They also discuss the concept of *Shura*, the Quranic command to Muslims to conduct their affairs through mutual consultations. Many Muslim scholars have often interpreted *Shura* as democracy, making the Quran the only religious text that explicitly talks about democracy. Esposito and Voll also identify two sources of Islamic *shariah* (the divine law) – *Ijma* and *Ijtihad* – as sources of democracy in the religion. *Ijma* is the idea of lawmaking by consensus and *Ijtihad* is law making through the exercise of independent judgement. Both these sources of Islamic law negate the idea of that Islamic *shariah* is entirely divine and immutable and therefore Islamic societies are not open to change or the exercise of human sovereignty. This article went a long way in undermining the claim that the religion of Islam was inherently anti-democratic. In fact, it not only makes the case for the compatibility of Islam and democracy; it also introduces to Western audiences the lesser-known case for an Islamic democracy which then-emerging scholars like Khaled Abou el-Fadl and M. A. Muqtedar Khan were beginning to make.⁴³

Esposito co-authored two books twenty years apart: *Islam and Democracy* (1996) with John Voll and *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring* (2016) with Tamara Sonn and John Voll. The first book both galvanized and transformed the debate on Islam and democracy by providing both a theological or theoretical basis for the compatibility of Islam and democracy and an empirical basis: case studies of Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, Malaysia, Algeria, and Egypt. The book, as summarized in their article in the *Middle East Quarterly*, explores Islamic heritage to identify several theological openings for democracy. But importantly, the case studies showed two things: (i) Islamists were potentially a force for democracy; (ii) various Muslim nations were indeed moving in their own unique ways toward democracy.⁴⁴ The second book dispenses with discussions of theology and engages with the literature on democratic transitions in comparative politics, ironically with the work of Samuel P. Huntington.⁴⁵ Clearly the second book does not address the question of whether Islam and democracy can co-exist; it asks why the transition to democracy has not

The growing and vibrant Muslim presence in America not only undermined the idea of Islam and the West as separate entities but also debunked the notion that Western values and Islamic values were incompatible

Esposito and Voll identify two sources of Islamic shariah (the divine law) –*Ijma* and *Ijtihad*– as sources of democracy in the religion

son from Tunisia. Tunisia, despite its economic woes, is the only nation to remain a democracy after the Arab spring. It is also the only Arab nation where the dominant Islamist party has given up their Islamist goals and have now become Muslim democrats. Al-Nahda does not advocate for an Islamic state or for establishing the *shariah* as the main source of Tunisian law. In many ways it is now modelling itself on the center-right Christian democratic parties. Al-Nahda remains electorally the most successfully political party in Tunisia, but it has never won absolute majority and perhaps that is the reason why they are forced to be accommodational in their approach and willing to share power with secular parties. One could compare the two cases of Egypt and Tunisia and argue that the absence of ideological pragmatism in the exclusivist approach of the Muslim Brotherhood, so clearly described by Esposito, Sonn and Voll, was the reason why a broad-based coalition opposing Islamists emerged so quickly in Egypt. On the other hand, the pragmatism of Al-Nahda not only saved its political future but also Tunisian democracy. But these post-orientalist authors seem determined not to doubt the democratic credentials and aspiration of the Muslim Brotherhood. The contemporary history of Tunisia and Egypt that is so well documented in their book does suggest that Islamists when in power may not respect pluralism and inclusion as much as they advocate for it when they are not in power.⁴⁷

The debate on Islam and democracy is a very critical one because it serves as a proxy for three key questions. The first question is whether Islam is compatible with modernity. By engaging how Islam deals with democratic principles, the debate asks how Islam fares with modern values of egalitarianism, secularism, and nationhood defined by laws and not racial or ethnic identities. The second question that is addressed in this debate is a policy question as to who the West should support in the internal political struggles and conflicts of Muslim nations: West-friendly autocrats or political Islamists who, in the words of Esposito and Voll, are “sometimes a program for religious democracy.” As is evident Esposito and the post-orientalists have won the academy but lost the policy arena to Bernard Lewis and new-orientalists. U.S. and Europe continue to support and do business with monarchs and autocrats. Western university curriculums and faculty are now broadly critical of the orientalist approach and its geopolitical political implications. Neoconservative forums like the Middle East Forum have emerged in a desperate attempt to target, intimidate

yet happened. Some of the cases are different –Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal and Tunisia replace Sudan, Malaysia, and Algeria– but the answer is the same: Muslim nations are struggling toward democracy in their own unique ways.⁴⁶ But I think they have missed an important les-

and undermine the influence of professors and scholars who belong to the post-orientalist school. They also seek to build a firewall between academia and the policy makers to ensure that orientalist thinking continues to hold sway in the think tank and policy worlds.⁴⁸

The third question is about Islamists and Israel. Islamists are strong proponents of Palestinian rights and critics of Israel, and in order to delegitimize them, supporters of Israel insist that Islamists are anti-democratic. By creating a values-based divide with Islamists, they strengthen support for Israel in the U.S. by calling it the “only democracy in the Middle East.”⁴⁹ This is a critical issue, because Lewis and his allies have made two assumptions beyond critical examination in mainstream American political discourse: (i) Israel –in spite of its many human rights violations against Palestinians– is a democracy; (ii) that Islam and Islamists are undemocratic and anti-democracy and anti-West. While the sheer weight of reality and regular reports of Israeli policies toward Palestinians is gradually changing public opinion in Europe and America, the policy makers, especially on the right, remain staunchly beholden to Lewis’ intellectual tutelage. The anti-West rhetoric from some Islamist voices, magnified by orientalist commentators, also helps undermine the image of political Islam, as a moderate and democratic force. It also continues to pervade in conservative circles the myth that Muslim nations are undemocratic because of Islam.

I must add that after the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to build a broad-based coalition and support for themselves, I have become skeptical of the claim that political Islamists are indeed a force for democracy. I fear that Islamists see democracy as a way to gain power to use state machinery to impose their agenda on everyone, and not necessarily as a desirable normative outcome in itself.⁵⁰ I am, however, profoundly convinced that the religion of Islam and democracy are indeed compatible and I have articulated this vision in my recent book, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*. The goals of Islamic governance, to build an inclusive, tolerant, compassionate and just society, I argue, cannot be achieved without democracy.⁵¹

Third Debate: U.S. Foreign Policy and Political Islam

The third debate between orientalists and post-orientalists is about how the U.S. should deal with Islamists. Even though this debate is about nonviolent Islamic political movements that seek to establish some form of Islamic governance, the orientalists often gloss over the distinction between Islam the religion and Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood or *Jamaat-e-Islami*.⁵² They also tend to cluster groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, which are clearly terrorist groups, with Hamas which does use violent methods but rather is a

national liberation movement and the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a nonviolent political movement under the rubric of Islamists. Then they recommend aggressive policies towards everything Islamic by focusing solely on terrorism. Thus, those who are influenced by Bernard Lewis and the orientalist look at the whole of Islam and the Muslim world through the lens of the “threat of political Islam to the West.” Alice Coen describes this phenomenon as “securitization of Islam” following the Copenhagen school, and shows its presence in senate discourses in the U.S..⁵³

One consequence of this deliberate absence of nuance is the element in the policy platform of candidate Donald Trump that became notorious as the “Muslim ban.”⁵⁴ Another consequence of this lack of nuance was the aborted attempt by the Trump Administration to label the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2019. The orientalist suffered a rare defeat in the policy arena. Several experts of terrorism disagreed with that policy and relying on the work of post-orientalist scholars were able to dissuade the government from labelling the Muslim brotherhood as a terrorist organization.⁵⁵ This victory for the post-orientalist viewpoint was especially significant because the Trump Administration’s efforts to ban the Brotherhood were backed by Egypt and Gulf Arab states.⁵⁶

Post-orientalists have consistently insisted that policy makers must not paint with a broad brush. They maintained, and continue to maintain, that political Islam is neither a threat to America and the West, nor anti-democracy. They do so by carefully distinguishing between violent groups advocating for Islamic states and nonviolent groups that seek Islamization of some kind.⁵⁷ They introduced the term political Islam as a way to distinguish these modern Islamic political movements from traditional Islam. It is on the basis of these distinctions that post-orientalists are able to assert that the vast majority of Muslims are peaceful, that Islam is democratic and political Islam while a challenge is not a threat.⁵⁸ Two political events – the terrible terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the brief but ineffective tenure of Muslim Brotherhood at the helm of Egypt from 2012-2013– have given much vindication to the Lewis doctrine. Post-orientalists now have to hedge and concede that yes some elements of Islamic revival and political Islam can lead to terrorism and violence and the emergence of groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. They also have to accept that Islamists can be just as authoritarian as secular nationalists and pseudo-liberals in the Middle East. But the two sides continue to debate on how the U.S. should deal with political Islam. The Lewis school essentially recommends a tough and aggressive approach such as banning the Muslim Brotherhood and declaring it a terrorist organization, and the Esposito school still maintains that nonviolent Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood are a force for democracy and must be accommodated and allowed to engage in politics, as in Tunisia.

This third debate between orientalists and post-orientalists has two phases: before and after the September 11 attacks on the U.S. In the first phase, this debate was basically a subset of the clash of civilizations debate. Lewis argued that Islamism posed a civilizational threat to the West and its

values, and either it needed to experience reforms (meaning Muslims embrace Western values wholesale) or the West needed to maintain military domination over the world of Islam, recognizing it as a source of war and terror.⁵⁹ Esposito argued that Islamism was not a threat but an alternate paradigm that posed only a civilizational challenge to the West. They were in his view advancing an alternate set of values and vision which Muslim societies and nations could aspire to. Thus, Lewis essentially advocated domination, and Esposito advocated accommodation. We must also recognize that none of the major scholars engaged in these debates were foreign policy scholars; they were experts in Islam, Islamic and Middle Eastern history and comparative politics of the region. Hence their recommendations, such as promote democracy, privilege stability and balance of power, were broad and more at the level of vision than actionable recommendations. Details were left to policy makers. In the foreign policy debate, the allies of Lewis included Sam Huntington, Fouad Ajami, Daniel Pipes, and Martin Kramer. Esposito's allies were John Voll, Fawaz Gerges, Juan Cole, Graham Fuller, and most of the academics in the area of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.⁶⁰

The U.S. abandoned diplomacy, accommodation, and democracy promotion in favor of preemptive wars

The U.S., and for that matter most nations, do not make foreign policies towards religions or social movements even if they are transnational. The U.S. officially maintained that it had no policy either toward Islam or Islamic movements. However, U.S. policies toward Islamic Iran after its revolution in 1979 allowed for convergence of policy making toward a country and a religion and still does. The policy of regime change toward Iran was designed not only to alter its foreign policy priorities but also change its identity, from Islamic to secular. The U.S. did, however, have stated policies on non-state matters such as democracy promotion and combating terrorism. Both of these policies were applied to Muslim nations. Esposito argued that the U.S. practiced double standards and was hypocritical. Esposito and his school accused the U.S. of turning its back on democracy when Islamists came to power in Algeria in 1992 and under the guise of combating terrorism the U.S. was bolstering authoritarian regimes and opposing Islamists. Pipes had famously argued that there are no moderate Islamists, suggesting that it would be erroneous to allow Islamists to come to power anywhere, and it appeared that the U.S. policies reflected that sentiment.⁶¹

But al-Qaeda's attack on the U.S. changed everything. It came at a time when the post-orientalist approach was on the ascendance and was getting some

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is one of the earliest deployments of postmodern assumptions and methods to the study of scholarship on 'the East'

justice problem. The enemy was named as 'radical Islam' a global phenomenon and hence the response was a 'global war on terror.' Some understood and critiqued this policy as essentially a "war on Islam."⁶² The devastating attacks in the eyes of many vindicated the claims advanced by Lewis and the neo-orientalists that Islam/political Islam was a grave threat and must be dealt with on a war footing. Lewis and his allies essentially dominated U.S. responses that conflated Islam, political Islam and terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. Nuance went out of the window, and the clash of civilizations dominated policy thinking. Since the threat was essentially coming from non-state actors, 'radical Islam' became the designated enemy. This idea still influences U.S. policy thinking and played a major role in the presidential elections of 2016.⁶³

The political environment immediately following September 11, it was an extremely fertile territory for Lewis to sow his seeds for a civilizational clash that would end in his view the threat that Islam and its revival posed to the children of Christendom. In books, articles and media interviews, he essentially sent the message that political Islam was a counterhegemonic movement that needed to be crushed in order for the U.S. to continue to have influence in the Middle East and safeguard its interests and Israel's security. His policy recommendation was simple: the U.S. must either "get tough or get out."⁶⁴ Since getting out was not an option -the U.S. was heavily invested in the region- the only alternative was to get tough. And so the U.S. embarked on a war against states (the 'axis of evil') and non-state actors. Essentially, the U.S. abandoned diplomacy, accommodation, and democracy promotion in favor of preemptive wars. Regime change became the key strategy to transform the Middle East from a region sizzling with anti-American sentiments to a region that would be pro-America, pro-democracy, pro-Israel and anti-Islamism. Orientalist geopolitics became the dominant paradigm in the policy world.

Esposito had to walk a fine line after September 11, 2001, as evident from his book *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. This was not supposed to happen. Esposito and his school had two critical questions to answer: (i) Did not the September 11 attacks confirm the real danger of the Islamic threat the Orientalists were warning about? (ii) What should the U.S. do now? *Unholy War* did a great job of explaining the rise of Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. It also explained how the Islamic concept of jihad was not terrorism and aggressive war

and what al-Qaeda had done was not because of Islamic teachings but was a reaction to the long-term consequences of U.S. foreign policy in the region. Esposito's school also tried to make a distinction between radical terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and moderate political Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Esposito and his camp recommended that the U.S. must change its foreign policy, end its uncritical support for Israel, promote democracy, end support for authoritarian regimes and accommodate moderate Islamists by allowing them to participate in the political process. Post-orientalist school was good at critiquing U.S. policies and providing a nuanced understanding of contemporary Muslim politics. But the school could not offer a foreign policy strategy that could end the immediate threat of terrorism and the anti-American postures and policies of hostile regimes in Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Their recommendations essentially involved U.S. accommodating political Islam and after the experience of Iran's Islamic revolution very few in the policy community were willing to embrace that.

Conclusion

The key idea that this article advances is that the Western discourse on Islam is no more an uncontested orientalist grand narrative. In every sphere, academia, media, social media and policy circles, there is an intense contestation about the authenticity and accuracy of knowledge that is produced about Islam, Muslims and relations between Muslim and Western nations. The emergence of post-orientalism, a perspective triggered by Edward Said through his seminal book *Orientalism* and nurtured by John Esposito and his school of thought, is one of the main reasons for this development. In some ways the post-orientalism that I describe in this paper is akin to the broader postcolonial discourse that seeks to free the East from the imagination and power discourses of the orientalists. Edward Said made a persuasive case that the knowledge about Islam and Muslims in the West was produced to help the West's geopolitical ambitions in the Muslim World and not to understand or know them. It supported and justified colonialism, imperialism and racism. In my discussion of the three debates that I contend have and are reshaping the study of Islam, I find that Said's claims about orientalist discourse are generally valid.

The post-orientalist school not only expanded on Said's critique of orientalism but also went one step further. While Said insisted that the imagination of Islam, Arabs and Muslims in the orientalist discourse was not authentic it was left to the post-orientalist to answer the questions, what is Islam and who are Muslims. The post-orientalist went even further by empowering Muslims to speak for themselves and their beliefs in western forums. I found that in each of the three debates –the clash of civilizations, the compatibility of Islam and democracy and U.S. policies towards Islamism– the post-orientalists

have succeeded in deconstructing orientalism and advancing a vision of Islam and Muslims which is less exotic, more realistic and authentic. While orientalist narratives contribute to Islamophobia, the post-orientalists are engaged in challenging stereotypes and myths foster Islamophobia. The post-orientalist school now overwhelmingly dominates the academia and thus most of the new scholars produced in the academy are sympathetic to if not entirely in agreement with Said and Esposito.

The policy arena is still under the sway of orientalism. Perhaps because of lobbies, interest groups and think tanks funded by interest groups, post-orientalists have been pushed to the margins of policymaking. But when one looks at the debate around the aborted attempt by the Trump Administration to label the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, it becomes apparent that the policy realm cannot resist the power of the knowledge produced in the academy for long. There is an additional development, which has not been explored in this paper, and that is the emergence of Muslim scholars in the academy and Muslims in the political and policy realm. This will prove to be a game changer and I hope that future research in this area will take that into account. The three debates discussed in this paper have changed Islamic studies in the West profoundly and for the better. They are also beginning to impact American and European foreign policies, but there is much room for progress in this sphere. ■

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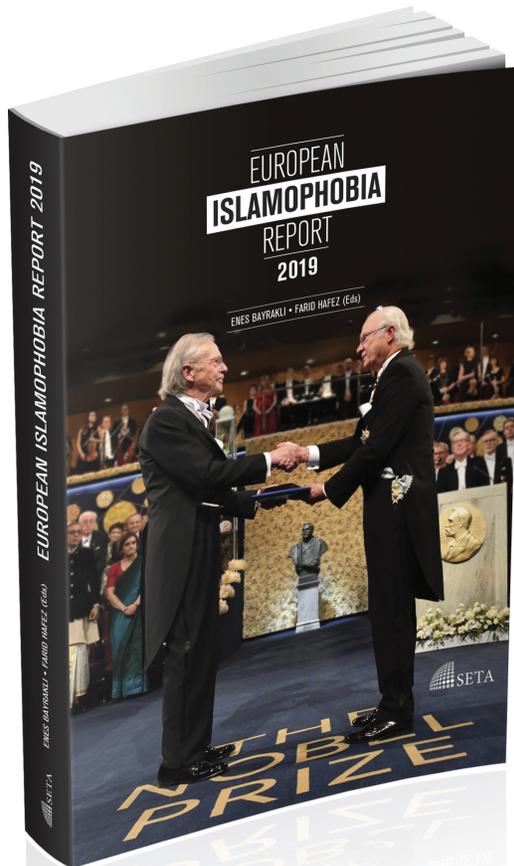
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EUROPEAN ISLAMOPHOBIA REPORT 2019



By ENES BAYRAKLI • FARID HAFEZ (Eds.)

The European Islamophobia Report 2019 includes a general assessment of Islamophobia in Europe in the year 2019 and 32 country reports that include almost all EU member states and additional countries such as Russia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.

