



FEATURE REVIEW

Contending with the Crisis of Islam and the Myth of Confrontation

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Fred Halliday

ISLAM AND THE MYTH OF CONFRONTATION: Religion and Politics
in the Middle East, 2nd ed. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003. 255 pp.

Bernard Lewis

THE CRISIS OF ISLAM: Holy War and Unholy Terror
New York: The Modern Library, 2003. 224 pp.

Islam was the immediate casualty in the histrionics of the uninformed and the self-righteous when the perpetrators of the September 11 carnage in the United States were known to be Muslim Arabs. Islam spawns terror. Islam is the enemy. Lewis's and Huntington's "clash of civilizations" is now a prophecy fulfilled (see Huntington 1993). Welcome to the new age of terror brought about by the Green Menace and turbaned terrorists. Or, for some Christian literalists, this is the time of the Antichrist's ascendance from the East as foretold in the New Testament. Within the American polity, the "talk from the White House, the Justice Department and the Pentagon draws from a familiar nationalist repertoire that reduces complex situations to easily grasped terms familiar from other times of tension and fear. The result is the ethnocentric invocation of a great conspiracy, an axis of evil, a monolith of terror" (Hunt 2002, 425). Thus, let there be crusades to crush the lair of evil in the Middle East, that center of the Muslim world

where hatred against the Christian West is honed to murderous perfection. Let a coalition of the good and the mighty bring democracy, development and all the accoutrements of the modern life to this benighted land of religious extremists. To destroy them is to save them from themselves.

To reflect on the work of scholars on this topic is to counter such apocalyptic vision. This review is in that direction. It intends to find out whether the works under consideration encourage a nuanced and informed understanding of Islam and the present geopolitics of conflict. Are these works more than intellectualized incantations that wish to hasten the conflict so that the righteous and the saved might be known?

Broadly, to structure this essay and to serve as a heuristic tool to explicate the arguments made by Lewis and Halliday in their respective books, a set of interrelated questions are set forth: Is Islam inherently in conflict with the world's non-Islamic, in particular, Western societies? In light of this question, what answers did Halliday and Lewis proffered in their respective works? What could be their bases for answering this question affirmatively or in the negative? What are the implications of such answers?

Halliday, professor of international relations at the London School of Economics, answers the first question in a clear-cut manner: "The very concept of an 'Islamic' threat is itself a chimera, and to talk of some enduring, transhistorical conflict between the 'Islamic' and 'Western' worlds is nonsense"(113). This rather forceful assertion will be elaborated in the review.

Lewis, professor emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University takes a different tack. He did not say outright that the fight is against Islam. The irony of his book is that though it is a know-thy-enemy guide for Americans—expected to be easily understood by the uninitiated—it is in fact peppered with casuistic qualifications regarding the conflict it wishes to explain in simple terms. In other instances, his explanations seem to contain self-evident truths that disarm the mind and make the reader conform to views contrary to past and prevailing events. Take for example his book's opening sentence: "President Bush and other Western politicians have taken great pains to make it clear that the war in which we are engaged is a war against terrorism—not a war against Arabs, nor, more generally, against Muslims, who are urged to join us in this struggle against our common enemy" (xv). Lewis is speaking to, and for the Americans. In this statement he made it

appear that the American president and the American people demonstrate due sensitivity to other faiths and peoples in pursuing its “war against terrorism”. To distinguish this war from other kinds of war, he went on to describe its polar opposite, Osama bin Laden’s “religious war” against the United States, the infidel superpower. From there, Lewis goes on to explain the crisis of Islam, making his book, as the blurb on its jacket puts it, “an essential reading for anyone who wants to know what Usama bin Ladin represents and why his murderous message resonates so widely in the Islamic world.” Now the question: If the “war against terrorism” is not a war intentionally waged against Arabs or Muslims, why bother to explain to Americans the vicissitudes of bin Laden’s Islamic world? Clearly, denials notwithstanding, the war Lewis adheres to in his book is a war against terrorism perpetrated by Muslim Arabs.

For Lewis, this war consists of two combined approaches on the part of the US. The first one is nourishing “democratic oppositions capable of taking over and forming governments” in strongly anti-American countries like Iraq and Iran (163). The corollary effort is eviscerating Muslim terrorists and fundamentalists like those belonging to al-Qaeda. He fears that if these people are not strongly dealt with, they “can persuade the world of Islam to accept their views and their leadership, then a long and bitter struggle lies ahead, and not only for America” (163). The phrase “not only for America” bears repeating since it is key to Lewis’s eventual assertion that:

Europe, more particularly Western Europe, is now home to a large and rapidly growing Muslim community, and many Europeans are beginning to see its presence as a problem, for some even a threat. Sooner or later, Al-Qa’ida and related groups will clash with other neighbors of Islam—Russia, China, India—who may prove less squeamish than the Americans in using their power against Muslims and their sanctities. If fundamentalists are correct in their calculations and succeed in their war, then a dark future awaits the world, especially the part of it that embraces Islam. (164)

After all the quivers of qualifications, Lewis still holds the view that once certain prerequisites are fulfilled, the conflict will assume civilizational lines and thus, indeed, he and Huntington, the high priests of “clash of civilizations” will be proven right.

That Halliday’s and Lewis’s views differ seems to be a matter of fact. To proceed from the obvious, Lewis argues that there is an essential, unchanging and all-encompassing Islam that serves as anchor of Muslim identity and politics. Imperialists and domestic modernists

aside, Lewis says that Islam, “for more than a thousand years...provided the only regulation of public and social life...Islamic political notions and attitudes remained a profound and pervasive influence” (13). This tenacity he attributes to Islam for being not only a “matter of faith and practice; it is also an identity and a loyalty—for many, an identity and a loyalty that transcend all others” (17). Hence, “Muslims...tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into nations” (xx). He offers as a proof of this argument the existence of the 57-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an organization of Islamic states. Similar organization does not exist, he claimed, among Orthodox Christian or Buddhist states (13-14).

Lewis however failed to note that OIC did not come into being by sheer force of faith. In fact, OIC’s *raison d’être* is rooted in an event more political than religious: “the criminal Zionist attempt to burn down the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque on 21 August 1969 in the occupied city of Al-Quds” (OIC 2004). This event is part of the history of Arab-Israeli geopolitical conflict that has long prevailed in the Middle East and not part of some Islamic religious revival. OIC was formed in response to the threat posed by the then newly formed nation of Israel. OIC is a recuperative act on the part of the Arab states that saw “the seizure of Arab lands, the plight of the Palestinian refugees from them in the camps where they turned from peasants into landless labourers, and the seeming neglect of their obligations by great powers, and the United Nations’ inability to do anything” (Roberts 1999, 541). To call their organization Islamic rather than Arab was just an attempt to project a greater solidarity than what the Arab states can muster.

Thus, Halliday wryly dismisses the view carried out by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, that “Islam” and the Islamic communities represent one community, one *umma*. He said that “this has never been true of the Islamic world since the years of the first caliphs and certainly not true of the Muslims of Western Europe” (123). To prove his point, Halliday cites the disparate and pragmatic, if sometimes adversarial stance between and among Islamic states in the case of the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and the 1990-91 Gulf War. In these instances, he showed that the Islamic states act not based on creed but on the *realpolitik* of preserving or advancing their own interests even at the expense of other Islamic states. Thus, if there is no internal coherence among the Islamic states, plus the fact that they are individually weaker than the un-Islamic West, “there cannot be a great ‘Islamic challenge’” (119).

Some scholars however, using an assessment almost similar to that of Halliday's, argued that it is this organizational disarray, Islam's perceived "weakness," that aggravates and prolongs the current crisis triggered by the September 11 attack on America. Viewing Islam as "a faith without denominations, hierarchies, and centralized institutions," it is argued that this "makes it difficult for Muslims to come together and speak with one voice on important issues—to say what is and what is not true Islam" (Bulliet 2002, 11). This view is prompted by the logic that if there were a single authority that represents Islam, then it would be easier to repudiate and discredit the discourse and actions by those considered its radical fringe. This view however is more of a wish, which even if fulfilled, will still raise questions as to its effectiveness.

The Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church were not of much help in the case of the Catholic Irish Republican Army (IRA) battling the Irish Protestants and the British rulers, all three resorting to terrorism to wage their war. A current study on the subject even condemns both the Protestant and Catholic churches for allowing "the terrorists to fill a vacuum of despair, hatred, and suspicion" (Dillon 1998). This only goes to show that the presence of a religious hierarchy to enunciate and enforce its creed does not guarantee that it will be listened to, or that it will even try to speak against repulsive deeds committed by its flock. To rely on sermons to subdue terrorism that capitalizes on social, economic, political, and cultural disparity and its attendant injustice is to believe on moral ascendancy that has no concrete and enforceable policy to stand on.

Nonetheless, there is a danger in accepting the view that Islam suffers from certain "weaknesses" as a religion, that it is in crisis, and that since individual Islamic states are weaker than Western or Northern powers, hence a "great Islamic challenge" is not in the offing. To accept these views is to realize that these discourses have successfully pathologized Muslim societies and polities, in particular those in the Middle East, that the stage for an outside intervention is set. A careful perusal of their respective books will show that though they have used different analytical optics in viewing and interpreting the events and the dialectics of change in the Islamic world, the implications of their arguments are unexpectedly the same: the West must change the Middle East. They only differ in means they proposed to employ.

At first, both authors did an exercise in surgery. Instead of condemning the whole Islamic body politic for being in an advance stage of decomposition, they have singled out with surgically precise

strokes particular parts that need to be excised to save the whole. Islam is then spared of the humiliating attribute that it nourishes militant Islamist terror.

Halliday and Lewis state that the September 11 terrorist attack on the US were carried out by members of an Islamist movement, a brand of radical Islam “that sought to resolve political and social issues by reference to Islam. The Islamist movement was directed against secular forces within Muslim society as well as against external powers”(x). Halliday went on to characterize what he initially perceived to be a singular Islamist movement:

the Islamist movement rejects Western values of secularism, democracy, the rule of civil law, equality between men and women, and between Muslims and non-Muslims; Islamists spouse gross racist generalizations about Jews, the “West” and in other contexts, Hindus; they are committed to a long-term struggle with the West, seen as decadent and aggressive, and to a militant, intransigent, conflict with the historic enemy....its goal was, through jihad, to convert the whole world to Islam. (110)

This depiction of the Islamist movement appears to contravene his earlier assertion. Previously, he stated that Islamic nation-states nourished this radicalism based on their respective self-serving interests thus, there could hardly be a unifying element among them. In his own representation of this movement, Halliday may have unwittingly conceded to the point that though there is no “great ‘Islamic’ challenge,” there is a core, radical Islamist movement that launches terrorist acts against its perceived enemy. This shift is apparent in the latter part of his book when he starts to mention “different varieties of Islamism” (128). The key to this shift is Halliday’s understanding of the changed relation between the Islamist movements and the nation-state. The current Islamist movements are not anymore in the service of the nation-states that once nourished them for its own interest. In Halliday’s appraisal, Islamist movements are now “revolts against the policies—authoritarian, secular and intrusive—of the modernizing state” which have failed to address the economic and cultural needs of Muslim societies (128). This being the case, the capture and deployment of state power to advance Islamist ideals is one of the goals of these movements. Hence, for Halliday, “until and unless the internal problems of these countries are reduced different varieties of Islamism will retain their appeal, against the backdrop of the diverse social and political crises between the different countries” (128).

Lewis, for his part, was able to come up with a clearer explanation of Halliday's "different varieties of Islamism":

Radical Islamism, to which it has become customary to give the name Islamic fundamentalism, is not a single homogenous movement. There are many types of Islamic fundamentalism in different countries and even sometimes within a single country. Some are state-sponsored—promulgated, used, and promoted by one or other Muslim government for its own purposes; some are genuine popular movements from below. Amongst state-sponsored Islamic movements, there are again several kinds, both radical and conservative, both subversive and preemptive. Conservative and preemptive movements have been started by governments in power, seeking to protect themselves from the revolutionary wave. Such are the movements encouraged at various times by the Egyptians, the Pakistanis, and notably the Saudis. The other kind, far more important, comes from below, with an authentic popular base. The first of these to seize power and the most successful in exercising it is the movement known as the Islamic revolution in Iran. Radical Islamic regimes now rule in the Sudan and for a while ruled in Afghanistan, and Islamic movements offer major threats to the already endangered existing order in other countries, notably Algeria and Egypt. (23-24)

Still, a tidy taxonomy did not save Lewis from Halliday's fate. He also ended up contradicting himself. If indeed his position is consistent with his earlier portrayal of radical Islamist movements, naming the Egyptians, the Pakistanis and in particular the Saudis, as the ones who encouraged at various times these movements, why did he suddenly recommend Iraq and Iran, and not Egypt, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia for regime change?

In two countries, Iraq and Iran, where the regimes are strongly anti-American, there are democratic oppositions capable of taking over and forming governments. We, in what we like to call the free world, could do much to help them, and have done little....If they succeed, we shall have friends and allies in the true, not just the diplomatic, sense of the words. (163-164)

Thawed straight from the Cold War, Lewis's imperial pronouncement is dripping with dangerous assumptions and all the period's paranoia. The obvious implication is this: if a regime is pro-American, then it is part of the terrorist-free world, if it is not, then it must be abetting terrorism. Even if these countries are ruled by mere band of thugs, as long as they are pro-American, then they will not incur the ire of the US. With pro-Americanism as the sole basis for judging

whether a state should be in line for regime change, the US that emerges from Lewis's book is exactly what George W. Bush has been mouthing: an imperial power that bullies the world with its either-you're-with-us-or-against-us bluster and the sole judge of what is good or evil. Preemptive and unilateral military actions by the US against any other state that it believes to harbor radical Islamists simply because it is anti-American will turn the world into a more unstable and treacherous place, as it has now. Terrorism against states will be occurring simultaneously with terrorism among and between states understood as "the use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce, especially for political purposes" (Random House Webster's College Dictionary, s.v. "terrorism").

Then things like Noonday happen. In April 2003, in the small town of Noonday, Texas agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation discovered by accident a weapon cache full of automatic machine guns, remote-controlled explosive devices, 60 pipe bombs and a cyanide bomb capable of reducing to smithereens a 30, 000-square-foot building (Krugman 2004). The owner of these terrorist's tools is William Krar, a right-wing extremist. Thus the question: Has the inordinate focus of US on radical Islamist movements rendered it more vulnerable to its own homegrown harbingers of death? Does the US government avidly pursue the likes of Krar? Apparently, there is a malignant disinterest on the part of the US. This seeming unconcern is only reinforced by scholars like Lewis who insinuates on readers that terrorists can only be seen in the faces of anti-American regimes and not in the face of the Krars and the Timothy McVeighs.

Likewise, Lewis also seems to have a sudden on-set of historical amnesia, a disease that a historian like him should have been immune from. His idea of "helping" democratic oppositions in order to have true friends and allies in the Middle East is naïve and completely ignores the various mutations that such notion of "help" have undergone. This he has lucidly discussed in three successive chapters in his book—its redeeming feature. Then "amnesia" caught up with him in the concluding chapter leading to his flawed recommendation. Another historian summed up the ways the US has been "helping" in the Middle East:

Troubles began with an oil embargo in 1973 and continued with the overthrow of an unpopular, US-backed shah and the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979, support for Iraq in its long, bloody war with Iran in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's bombing of Libya, the involvement

of marines in fighting in Lebanon in 1983 following the Israeli invasion, the Gulf War of 1990-1991, the residual American military presence in the Persian Gulf, continued containment of Iran, a policy of economic and military pressure against Iraq, and the ongoing diplomatic cover and military and financial support for a territorially expansionist Israel. (Hunt 2002, 420)

It must be added that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden both gained strength and renown while being “helped” by the US. The US supported Saddam against Iran and bin Laden against the Soviets.

Supposing that this is how Lewis wish to proceed to accomplish the second half of his programme on radical Islamists, i.e. preventing them from persuading or coercing the Islamic world to accept their views and their leadership, the only plausible scenario that emerges is a fratricidal combat between the US-backed “democratic opposition” and the radical Islamists. In case the regime change succeed, how long will the US be helping the new regime so as not to appear it is engaged in neocolonialism? Will the US be so altruistic that it will not seek profit by either sucking dry the new regime’s natural resources or making it an American preserve where cheap US goods can be dumped? Will the US regime in power refuse to pander to the American right that it will restrain overzealous Christian evangelists from haphazardly saving Muslim souls for Christ?

Lewis’s attempt to explain the crisis of Islam—or more precisely Islam in the Arab Middle East—ended up as an exposition on the crisis of logic and abundance of inconsistencies that underpin the current US imperial adventure.

Does Halliday offer a better alternative? For him:

To evolve a policy to solve or reduce what is presented as the conflict between the ‘West’ and the Islamic world requires a dual programme: first, separate the real, material, specific and secular difficulties faced by both Islamic and Western society from their confused religious expression; then address these difficulties themselves. To sum it up, such a policy would have to be underpinned by a concept of universalism, which would include secularism, plus development. The issue of development understood as both growth in the economic field and democratization in the political, is a useful starting point. (128)

To clarify Halliday’s recommendation, there is a need to restate his assertion that the current Islamic movement, in its political form, is “defined and determined by national states and rival political factions.

This is so in the sense, first, that it remains the goal of these movements to capture state power, and, second, that if and when they do so they use Islamic doctrine to bolster the interest of those states (Iran and Sudan are no exception)” (119). In short, Halliday conjures two fields of battle where militant Islamist can be taken down. The first one is in the field of epistemology or knowledge production, where scholars and social scientists will be the soldiers that will cut through the morass of propaganda from both sides of the extremists and expose the real conditions of the Muslim societies. The other terrain of conflict will still have the nation-states as the primary actors. He was quick to qualify that the nation-states’ actions must not lead to imperialist domination. For him, reforming Islamist regimes must be done through a “a firm, multilateral, always self-critical insistence on universal codes of political practice, as embodied in the conventions and documents of the UN to which all member states supposedly subscribe”(131).

Two aspects of Halliday’s proposal should be critiqued. The first one is his insistence on separating “confused religious expression” from the “real, material, specific and secular difficulties” before addressing the problems that both Islamic and Western societies face. The second one that should also be examined is his emphasis on a concept of universalism that includes secularism and development as a necessary basis for a policy on the Muslim Middle East.

On the first aspect, one reviewer of Halliday’s book noted that: “It is noteworthy that in a book on religion and politics in the Middle East, the author does consult a single Arabic or Persian (or Hebrew, Turkish, or Kurdish) source; there is, for example, no Arabic or Persian publication by Islamists, whose views he analyzes” (Massad 1997, 114). This is a major limitation on Halliday’s part since a number of important works by Islamists are written in their local languages.

Moreover, Halliday even chided Lewis and Edward Said, for failing in what he defines as the central intellectual task: actually analyzing the societies they have studied, rather than what the people from these societies write and say about themselves and their collectivity (201). His aversion to autochthonous representations as if these are contaminants that could spoil his pristine sample of a society is untenable. What these people say or write about themselves, their society or even other people unarguably constitute who they are and what their society is, and therefore must be considered an integral part that must be examined when a particular society is under scrutiny. What Halliday disregards as “confused religious expression” can still

“shed a revealing light on what many historians consider ‘the real stuff of history,’ namely, the experience of suffering, injustice, and alienation, mixed with and tempered by hope for deliverance, that characterizes the human condition” (Appleby 2002, 511).

Halliday’s preferred method of studying radical Islamism and the societies where it is embedded is quite reminiscent of colonial anthropologists who wantonly privilege their own explanation over those that came from the society that they have studied (if they have not yet “silenced” these sources). That the universal is superior to the local is in line with Halliday’s second contentious assertion: to bring secularism and development on Middle Eastern societies through multilateral institution like the UN.

Rather than offer possible scenarios, he opted to prescribe solutions as to what kind of transition is needed in the Middle East. Economically, he said, “if there is to be a successful integration of the Islamic countries into the wide non-Islamic four-fifths of the world, it will have to take the form of economic competition, both industrial and other, as opposed to a recourse to outdated and rather ineffectual demagogies, and arms....Economic exclusion and political rejection [of Islamic countries] will fuel fundamentalist antagonism” (130). But how would the non-Islamic countries, in particular the West, react to policies of Islamic states that deny the equality of men and women, Muslim and non-Muslims and other acts that curtail, if not outright violate, individual human rights? Halliday answers that:

It can be anticipated that ... [they] will resort to the platitudes of anti-imperialists and cultural relativist outrage to rebut external criticisms, but this must take second place to insistence by the wider international community on the universality of legal and moral considerations, and insight into the calculations and corruptions that often underlie appeals to distinctive moral principles. (131)

In sum, Halliday argues, “it is essential that the West frames a long-term policy of economic interaction with these countries designed to assist them on the path of development. However, such a policy must not entail the indulgence of Islamist movements themselves, or of the false inclusive claims made by Islamists in the Islamic world or in the West (131).” What remains unclear about this whole plan is this: What is the nature of the long-term policy of economic interaction that will be designed to assist the Muslim Middle East to attain development? What does he mean by “economic competition,” both industrial and other form?

If these are the perverse prescriptions of neoliberal economics, then Halliday has to face the numerous criticism that blames this very economic model for the rise of Islamist movements and the socio-economic maladies that ravage the Muslim Middle East today. One scholar sees radical Islamism as a “cultural backlash against the contemporary universalist pretensions of the Western culture and a political reaction to the economic exclusion of the Muslim masses from the benefits of the globalization economy” (Monshipouri 1998, 54). Other leading scholars of the region generally agree on this view (Amin 2002, Weeden 2003, Richards 2002).

The prevalence of authoritarian secularism is also intertwined with this discredited economic model which, “combined with a sense of powerlessness, the legacies of Western imperialism and the US hegemony and support for Israel, has led to a bitter reaction against Western power” (Hurd 2002, 85). During the Cold War, secularism and development have made some disastrous forays in Muslim societies and polities in the Middle East. These ventures were cloaked in authoritarianism fully backed by Western powers who were dueling it out for supremacy in the area, notably the US and the defunct USSR. Egypt, Pakistan and the Pahlavist Iran are the more prominent examples of this failed convoluted convergence that led to greater popularity of Islamist movements (Keddie 1998, Weeden 2003). In fact, these authoritarian regimes—whether colonial or postcolonial—did not try to separate religion from politics, but subjugated Islam to become a convenient tool in consolidating their dictatorships (Nasr 2003). By the 1970s, changes in the Muslim Middle East start to presage the current situation:

Disillusionment with the performance of the states in the 1970s and the creation of parvenu classes that exemplified the ostentatious excesses of the “haves” in contrast to the impoverishment of the “have nots” generated widespread discontent. This discontent was exacerbated with the debt crisis of the 1980s, the decline of the price of oil, and the IMF-imposed restructuring projects that limited state expenditures. At a time when the distributive capabilities of states were undermined and leaders were increasingly perceived to be venal and corrupt, the popularity of the Islamist movements rose considerably. (Weeden 2003, 59)

Mindful of colonialism’s and authoritarianism’s detrimental effect on secularism and development, Halliday therefore emphasizes that the issue of development should be understood as “both growth in the

economic field and democratization in the political.” This closely approximates Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s view of “development as freedom,” where, human capabilities are enhanced and the possible choices people can make in their daily lives are increased (Sen 1999). The assumption here is that by improving accountability, economic governance would also improve in consequence and thereby stimulate investment. However, an improved accountability on the part of the states is an objective that faces enormous difficulty in the Muslim Middle East today. This place, in Samir Amin’s acerbic phrase, has long been ruled by “a General who proved to be an assassin by nature, a junior police officer specialized in torture, or a king who built perpetually dark dungeons, a chief of a tribal pyramid or a religious extremist” (2002). To bring democracy from the outside will definitely face a stiff resistance and in the short-term, instability might ensue.

The so-called “war against terrorism” by the US has definitely not helped in improving the prospect of a democratic transition. It has even become an obstacle:

The US itself has set a bad example by attempting to introduce elements of military justice in dealing with terrorism. The expectation by the West that Islamist extremists will be rounded up in the global war against terrorism has been greeted with glee by many authoritarian government in the region....The current turn of events, by further constricting human rights and democratic liberties, may exacerbate this trend rather than help solve the political problems that have been given to rise to religious extremism. (Dalacoura 2002)

This situation has even convinced other scholars that the US and other Western powers have no desire to see the region in peace and free of dictators (Amin 2002, Richards 2003). One author contends that this is due to the post-9/11 policy shifts in the United States that ensured any despot who resolutely pursued violent enemies of the United States could depend upon US support (Richards 2003, 70). A more radical view argues that:

The permanent state of war imposed in the region by Israel and the western power supporting its project in turn constitutes a powerful motive for further perpetuation of the autocratic regimes of the Arab countries. This blockage of a possible democratic evolution weakens the opportunities for revival in the Arab world, thereby paving the way for the deployment of the dominant capital and the hegemonic strategy of the United States. (Amin 2002)

One might argue that it is exactly to avoid this situation that Halliday insists on a multilateral approach. He failed however to elaborate how this particular step will be put in effect and who will be the key actors. Failing on this, he also did not confront two questions that are also important in any policy discussion on the Muslim Middle East: Should secularism and development in the Middle East be brought in from the outside? Are Muslim societies and polities incapable of changing their own societies for the better?

At the start, it was stated that this review essay intends to find out whether Halliday's and Lewis's works promote a critical understanding of Islam and the current conflicts in the Muslim Middle East. After grappling with the arguments of both authors, it could be said that they offer well-reasoned disquisition on Islam and the Muslim Middle East. Yet, they were hard put to come up with views that can show the reader the possible coordinates where the desire of the peoples of the Muslim Middle East for freedom, democracy and development will meet with similar forces from the outside. One can only hope that the congruence of these forces is still possible, that they will be able to resist the imperialists and the radical Islamists who wanted to transform the region into their own intolerant images. ❁

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