

Country Portraits

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**Islam,
Modernity,
and Public
Diplomacy in
the Arab World:
A Moroccan
Snapshot**

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Prior to the coalition invasion in Iraq, one of the hottest topics of intellectual debate in the Arab world, as well as on al-Jazeera satellite television, was “Islam and modernity” (*al-Islam wa al-hadatha*). Discussions of religion and modernity framed even the widely discussed 2002 Arab development report. The fact that such a document is accessible in several languages via the Internet throughout the Arab world and elsewhere also shows the rapidly changing ground rules for public discussion and debate.¹

Islam and Islam’s relation to modern society are central topics in present-day debate and discourse. What is not thoroughly modern and up to date—in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States—are understandings of the role that

1. See Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, “The Birth of a Media Ecosystem: Lebanon in the Internet Age,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 61–79.

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religion plays in contemporary social life. Ironically, the secular bias of Western modernization theory has deflected attention away from the pervasive role of religious practices and values in contemporary societies, particularly in the Muslim-majority world.

Modernization Theory and Religion

In the early 1960s, a leading American public intellectual saw the Muslim world as facing an unpalatable choice: either “neo-Islamic totalitarianism” intent on “resurrecting the past” or a “reformist Islam” that would open “the sluice gates and [be] swamped by the deluge.”² Another suggested that Middle Eastern societies faced the stark choice of “Mecca or mechanization.”³ At the least, such views suggested an intensely negative assessment of the possibilities of indigenous evolution in Muslim societies.

Common to all variants of modernization theory is the assumption of a declining role for religion, except as a private matter. To move toward modernity, political leaders must displace the authority of religious leaders and devalue the importance of traditional religious institutions. Modernity is seen as an “enlargement of human freedoms” and an “enhancement of the range of choices” as people begin to “take charge” of themselves.⁴ In this view, religion can retain its influence only by conforming to the norms of “rationality” and relativism, accepting secularization, and becoming subordinate to science, economic concerns, and the state.

2. Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 129.

3. Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1964 [1958]), 405.

4. T. N. Madan, “Secularism in Its Place,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 6 (1987): 747–59.

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Recent history offers formidable challenges to Western modernization theory. Of all third world countries, Iran had undergone enormous state-driven modernization prior to 1978–79. Nonetheless, the state’s greatest challenge emanated from the growing urban middle classes, those who had benefited the most from modernization. Revolution, not political stability, was the result. Moreover, religious sentiment and leadership, not the secular intelligentsia, gave coherence and force to the revolution.

Modernization theory also deflected attention away from other politically influential religious movements in the 1970s, such as the rise of Solidarity in Poland, liberation theology throughout Latin America, and protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics. In the words of philosopher Richard Rorty, religion usually functions as a “conversation-stopper” outside of circles of believers.⁵ That’s why Western modernization experts viewed secular nationalisms, including the rise of the Ba’ath party in Syria and Iraq, as forces for modernization and development.

The Return of Religion

Although it is easy to be critical of Samuel Huntington’s “clash” argument because of its reliance on superseded ideas of culture, he was one of the first political scientists to spur colleagues and policy makers to reemphasize the roles of culture and tradition in political and international relations.⁶

5. Cited in John Keane, “The Limits of Secularism,” *Times Literary Supplement* (January 9, 1999), 12.

6. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49. For comments on Huntington’s argument as it applies specifically to the Muslim world, see Dale F. Eickelman, “Muslim Politics: The Prospects for Democracy in North Africa and the Middle East,” in *Islam*,

Decades before Huntington's argument, sociologist and public intellectual Edward Shils vigorously argued that traditions are not merely unquestioned residues from earlier eras; instead, they are actively maintained clusters of cultural concepts, shared understandings, and practices that make political and social life possible.⁷ These pervasive cultural understandings coexist with and shape the experience of modernity. In this sense, ethnicity, caste, and clientelism can be as distinctly modern as the idea of individual choice.

Politics, like religion, is a struggle over people's imaginations, a competition and contest over the meanings of symbols. This means that politics encompasses tradition, not only in the form of practices and shared understandings but also in the interpretation of symbols and the control of institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain those symbols. Politics also involves cooperation in and contest over symbolic production and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that serve as the symbolic arbiters of society.

The role of symbolic politics in general, or of "Muslim politics" in the sense of a field for debate as opposed to a bloc of uniform belief and practice, could be seen as less exceptional if the European experience with secularism were kept in mind. Religious discourse was a basic precondition for the rise of the early modern public sphere in Europe.⁸ Indeed, contemporary defenders of secularism often exaggerate the durability and open-mindedness of thoroughly secular institutions, be they in the United States, Turkey, or India. In the context

Democracy, and the State in North Africa, ed. John Entelis, 35–38 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

7. Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 17.

8. Dominique Colas, *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories*, trans. Amy Jacobs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

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of the Muslim-majority Middle East, the militant secularism of some governing elites—the Turkish officer corps, for example—has been associated until recently with authoritarianism and intolerance more than with “enlightenment” values.

Because the Muslim-majority world remains feared by those who regard it as the last outpost of the antimodern, the role of religious intellectuals in contributing to an emerging public sphere is often overlooked. This public sphere is rapidly expanding because of the growth of higher education, the increasing ease of travel, and the proliferation of media and means of communication. Both mass education and mass communication, particularly the proliferation of media, profoundly influence how people think about the language of religious and political authority throughout the Muslim world. It is only a minor paradox that a strong indication of modernity is the way in which a decentralized al Qaeda has succeeded in organization and practice in the face of determined efforts to eradicate it.

Terrorism’s Thoroughly Modern Face

Terrorism in the name of Islam also has a thoroughly modern face. Osama bin Laden no longer makes many videos, but when he did, his rehearsed message and presentation of self was as thoroughly modern as that of French-educated Pol Pot. Bin Laden may have tried to reinvent a traditional Islamic warrior “look,” but his sense of the past is an invented one. The language and content of his videotaped appeals, such as a recruitment video that appeared in late spring of 2001, were even more contemporary than his camouflage jacket, Kalashnikov rifle, and Timex watch. The CNN-like video, complete with “zippers”—running text beneath the images—was as

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fast-paced as a U.S. Army recruitment video or a U.S. presidential campaign ad.

Indeed, bin Laden is thoroughly imbued with the values of the modern world, even if only to reject them. He studied English at a private school and used English for his civil engineering courses. His many business enterprises flourished under highly adverse conditions. He sustained flexible, multinational organizations in the face of enemies—moving cash, people, and armaments undetected across frontiers.

Unlike most of his colleagues, bin Laden has been a highly visible poster child for transnational religious terrorism. Underestimating the intelligence, commitment, and tenacity of international terrorists would be an error as tragic as assuming that they are on the run. The best candidates for terrorist activities, like candidates for “martyrdom” operations, appear not to be maladjusted, undereducated, suicidal misfits; rather, they are intelligent, committed, motivated individuals willing to sacrifice material and emotional comforts because they regard their religion as their most important personal value.⁹ The spring 2001 al Qaeda recruitment video appeals to those wishing to devote themselves to a higher cause, and organized, experienced cadres appear able to recruit those most capable of advancing the cause.

In the past few years, to speak about “public Islam” and the “common good” (*al-maslaha al-'amma*)—a Qur'anically sanctioned term that has more resonance than calls to civil society and that is used for this purpose by many of those who support civil society—requires tenacity and courage. Columbia may still lead the world in the number of deaths directly attributable to terrorism, but the events of September 11, the

9. For a summary of studies on would-be martyrs and attitudes toward them, see Scott Atran, “Who Wants to Be a Martyr?” *New York Times*, May 5, 2003.

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October 2002 bombings in Bali, the May 2003 “kamikaze” attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the November attacks in Riyadh and Istanbul, and the continued bombings and violence elsewhere, including Jerusalem and Baghdad, test the limits of civility and tolerance. One place to begin looking for changing attitudes is the so-called Arab “street.”

The New Arab “Street” in Morocco

The Arab “street”—a term that is rapidly disappearing from Washington shorthand—has rapidly evolved in the past two decades from the shapeless and manipulated image that the term once evoked in the West. Throughout the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey, there is a more concrete awareness than in the past of the benefits and characteristics of more open societies. From March 20, 2003, a day after the first British and U.S. bombs fell on selected targets in Baghdad, until early June of that year, I was “embedded” in the old *madina* of Fez, twelve minutes by fast walk from the nearest drivable road. Complete with donkeys, mules, pushcarts, CD and cassette shops selling the latest pirated pop music, and satellite TVs in coffee shops, Fez’s *madina* must qualify as the quintessential Arab “street.”

Many of my neighbors lived at the economic edge, buying minuscule amounts of cooking oil and supplies meal by meal and often on credit because of meager incomes. Having been away from Fez for eight years, I was surprised by the prevalence of satellite television or access to it in coffee shops. During the first weeks of the Iraqi invasion, almost everyone’s last choice for news was Morocco’s state-run television, watched only for the “official” story. Qatar’s al-Jazeera satellite TV was usually the channel of choice, although competing Arabic satellite news channels, especially al-’Arabiya, were also closely

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watched. One did not have to be wealthy to watch satellite TV. Few Fassis read newspapers for understanding the latest events—only 1 percent of Moroccans regularly do. In contrast, about 4 percent of Algerians regularly read newspapers in spite of Algeria's much lower rate of literacy.¹⁰

After the fall of Saddam's regime—announced April 10 in *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), the premier international Arabic language newspaper; repeated endlessly on most Arab satellite channels; and grudgingly conceded by Morocco's partisan local press—discussion along my particular Arab "street" was uncannily like discussions in the Western press: What happens next? Will America (Britain was scarcely mentioned) bring a better government? What will be the Turkish reaction, especially if Iraq's Kurds are given a voice in government?

Although the term *democracy* (*al-dimuqratiya*) was used only by the educated, many people were aware of restrictions placed on their genuine political participation. Freedom of the press and relief from government manipulation of the electoral political process were themes understood by many more. Discussions of politics and the implications of the "regime change" in Iraq were more animated in private homes than on the Arab "street."

In 2003, the perpetrators of the May 16 bombings in Casablanca carefully timed them as a media event. Moroccans were finishing a week of celebrations for the naming ceremony for the monarch's first child, Hassan III. The evening news on state television was still showing images of celebrations throughout the country and the monarch's visits to major religious shrines in Fez and Meknes. In Marrakech, on the night of May 15, I witnessed dancing in the streets (young

10. Oumama Draoui, "Le livre dans un piteux état," *Le Journal hebdomadaire* (Casablanca), (May 3–9, 2003): 28.

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men only, of course, as is locally “proper”) and heard a band playing the then popular Arabic song, “Give Me a Visa, Give Me a Passport.” The televised pageantry the next evening was splendid and the television announcers breathless in proclaiming the people’s joy and unity with the ‘Alawi dynasty and the king’s designated successor, the infant “deputy of the era” (*wali al-’ahd*). The coordinated bomb attacks in the center of Casablanca were aimed at Jewish and foreign targets, including the Jewish cemetery next to the old *madina*, a Spanish restaurant, and a hotel often used by tourists from Israel and in which a Moroccan-American seminar on counterterrorism had just concluded. These attacks quickly displaced news of the royal birth.

The May 17 evening television news showed the devastation, including photographs of the mainly Moroccan victims and their relatives. The king visited the scenes of carnage and comforted the survivors; television showed all. The palace spokesperson declared that the investigation would be “transparent,” punishment of the perpetrators would be “without mercy,” and Morocco’s steps toward “democracy” would not be derailed—the latter of which was a reference to local elections postponed from April to September 2003 because of concerns of growing Islamist influence.

The public face of response was horror and shock. The private face is harder to read. Because the monarch spoke out, few people offered contrary opinions in public. After a summer 1994 terrorist bombing in Marrakech’s main square, the Djema’a el-Fina, the national manhunt quickly tracked down the perpetrators and had widespread popular support. As one Islamic activist explained to me at the time, this was a national issue, not a political one, and people volunteered leads to the police throughout Morocco.

A similar outcome to the 2003 bombings will offer a mea-

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sure of the current balance of political forces. Although Moroccans spoke less about the Casablanca bombings than they did about the invasion of Iraq in late March and early April 2003, the level of public awareness and concern was high. A few days after the Casablanca bombings, state television was filled with images of projects to relieve the desperate poverty of Morocco's shantytowns. The Ministry of Education announced that illiteracy rates will be reduced in the next few years, and the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Religious Affairs announced plans to remove extremist preachers from mosques. Many Moroccans, including journalists with some of the small circulation weekly reviews, have rediscovered the "forgotten" inhabitants, such as the squalid Sidi Moumen shantytown on the outskirts of Casablanca, home to most of Casablanca's May 16 "kamikaze" bombers. Yet most Moroccans remain skeptical about how long or how deep this "rediscovery" of Morocco's poor and disadvantaged will persist.

The Japanese term *kamikaze*, the preferred term used by Moroccan government spokespeople in the wake of the Casablanca bombings, was an interesting choice because it avoided the direct invocation of a religious term, such as the Arabic *shahid* ("martyr") or its direct denial as *intihari* ("suicide"). *Kamikaze* carries less contextual baggage, and thus becomes the first Japanese term to enter Moroccan colloquial usage and Arabic usage in general. It also possibly indicates the ambivalence of state spokespeople in public about choosing Arabic terms that would have unequivocally denied religious legitimacy to all those who would use such tactics in support of causes elsewhere. The good news is that the invocation of a Japanese term at least occasioned public, although not broadcast, discussion and debate. One wonders, however, how long it will be before people start using the term *Islamikaze*.

Discovering Open Societies and Making Them Work

The substantial growth in mass education over the past three decades, the proliferation and accessibility of new media and communications, and the increasing ease of travel make it impossible for state and religious authorities to monopolize the tools of literature and culture. The ideas, images, and practices of alternative social and political worlds have become a daily occurrence. They enter domestic space through satellite and cable television, and the alternate realities are better understood than in the past. Rapidly rising literacy levels and familiarity with an educated Arabic formerly restricted to an elite facilitate this better comprehension. They also rehearse viewers to respond to those in authority in the common Arabic of the classroom and the media.

Ideas of just rule, religious or otherwise, are not fixed, even if some radicals claim otherwise. Such notions are debated, argued, often fought about, and re-formed in practice. Such debates are occurring throughout the region. A needed first step is to recognize the contours, obstacles, and false starts, both internal to the region's different countries and external, to making governance less arbitrary and authoritarian.

In April 2003, a Moroccan journalist, commenting on the shortcomings of Morocco's September 2002 elections and their relevance to the September 2003 local elections, wrote, "I am no longer interested in transparency as an end in itself, but rather as an instrument of political negotiation to brandish several months prior to [our] local elections." He concluded, "Communication does not necessarily mean credibility."¹¹ Perhaps not. However, the ability to communicate in a com-

11. Driss Ksikes, "Un Hold-up avorté?" *Tel Quel* 72 (April 5–11, 2003): 28–37.

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mon language, confront authority in it, compare multiple sources of information on other people's experiences with similar issues elsewhere, and obtain reliable information and share it rapidly—abilities held until recently only by state authorities and a political elite—have dramatically changed shared understandings of religion and politics throughout the Arab Middle East. They have also altered the prospects for open societies and democracy.

The government's response to the November terrorist attacks is being carefully watched by all Moroccans, and efforts to characterize Islamists in general as "Stalinist fascists" or "intellectual fascists" may suffer severe backlash, especially in cities such as Casablanca, Tangier, Fez, Meknes, Rabat, and Marrakech, as well as in the universities, where Islamist thought and practice—although not terrorism—are gaining ground faster than the government and many others care to admit.

Such challenges are not regional alone, and foreign powers that act in the region to encourage more open societies must now match deeds with words. Successes, like shortcomings, will now become known in real time. Modernity offers opportunities as well as challenges. If U.S. military strength and efficacy is now matched by a persuasive and effective public diplomacy that works, encouraging open societies and making progress in resolving even the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, then we will have the most powerful means imaginable to turn the Arab "street" into a forum in which vast numbers of people, not just a political and economic elite, will have a say.

Of course, many of these voices will seek ideas of just rule in religion. We may find this use of religion in the public square unfamiliar, but, as in Turkey and possibly in postwar Iraq, the religiously committed can learn to become moderates

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and to work toward achieving open societies. Although achieving this goal will be more demanding than was regime change in Iraq, it is an opportunity that can, and must, be seized.