



# The Arab Revolts, Islam and Postmodernity

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## Abstract

The article deals with the political and cultural context of the Arab revolts and the representation of Muslim politics in the 'west'. It evaluates the changes that the current events have already brought about and how Islam as politics and imaginary has entered a new phase and trajectory that is very different from Islamist concepts in the Qutbian tradition. What we are experiencing, it is argued, is the emergence of a 'post-modern' Islam that is diffuse, decentred and almost post-ideological in its political syntax.

## Keywords

Islam, postmodernity

A few meters from my office at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the heart of London's Bloomsbury area is the Senate House of the University of London, a remarkable neoclassical colossus of a building that functioned as the headquarters of Britain's ministry of information, where George Orwell worked occasionally during World War II. The building's influence on Orwell is apparent in his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) which powerfully evokes a lobotomized society controlled by Big Brother, whose Thought Police dominate a brainwashed populace while torturing anyone guilty of 'thoughtcrime' into submission. Winston Smith, the tragic hero, is charged with the daily task of altering the historical record to conform with whatever the current position of the regime (Oceania) happens to be in relation to its counterparts (Eurasia and Eastasia); he works at the Ministry of Truth, which Orwell drew on his wartime experiences of Senate House to depict. The novel is most often viewed as a political satire of the totalitarianism of the era (especially Soviet, as the fascist regimes had fallen by the time the book was written) and an indictment of ultra-controlled illiberal societies. Among the most memorable themes is its emphasis on the state's use of mass media to

establish complete power over language and thought. Orwell elaborates this theme via the concept of ‘Newspeak’, the language of the ruling party, used to smooth over any complexity in favor of easy and clear dichotomies: ‘goodthink’ versus ‘thoughtcrime’.

Orwell writes elsewhere, in a famous essay, that ‘(political) language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.’<sup>1</sup> In this non-fictional context, Orwell seems to be acknowledging that ‘thoughtcrime’ is not limited to Soviet and fascist regimes, that the distortion of reality is a feature of politics in general, and that the media is complicit in the assault on independent thinking. The word ‘Orwellian’ has itself become instantly recognizable in modern media and political discourse as its description of a world of lies, propaganda and indoctrination. Its connotations seem to become even more sinister when it is used to identify, not direct and overt deceit, but the kind of ‘thought control’ that operates in advanced capitalist societies: more ciphered, clandestine, opaque, flatly networked, horizontal, penetrative, global and politically transcendent than that in the intensely vertical and vulgar top-down form indicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This current form of ‘thought control’ can be seen operating in relation to many politicized topics, but it is particularly apparent in depictions of Arabs and Muslims, especially after the terror attacks on the United States in September 2011. As I have argued in *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations*, the outburst and jingoistic vitriol against individuals and issues considered to be remotely ‘Islamic’ was the surface effect of a cultural constellation that runs deep in the subliminal consciousness of western Europe and North America. In order to accentuate that this ‘Islamophobic’ assemblage is dense and historically anchored, I called it a ‘clash regime’, a system that reproduces Islam as unique, deviant, violent and ultimately different to ‘us’ (Adib-Moghaddam 2011). It is this regime of truth, nurtured by influential doyens of our contemporary culture, which compels ‘us’ to believe in some inevitable, cosmic battle with ‘them’. It is such norms, institution and ideologies that fortify boundaries which are turned into trenches of war during times of crisis. And it is in this way that murder in the name of civilization continues to be accepted and legitimated as an international *modus operandi* (Adib-Moghaddam 2011: ch. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*. Available at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/orwell/george/079p/>

## The 'Other' Side of 'Us'

The single most important effect of the Arab intifada has to be that the events provide us with even more tools to demolish that clash regime erected by the doyens of right wing culture in east and west, north and south. In this short essay, I can only start to argue that the uprisings are indicative of a postmodern form of globalized politics that reclaims the universality of norms such as social justice, independence, freedom and democracy. This can be summed up as a process of de-territorialization of these norms. In effect, Arabs and Muslims are reclaiming history after it was 'stolen' by historians and functionaries of the colonial era who were complicit in purifying the archives of the 'west' from impingement from the 'other' (Goody 2006). Until very recently, certainly during the period of the 'war on terror', Arabs and Muslims were deemed anti-democratic, illiberal and politically blinded by centuries of 'Oriental despotism'. The democratic revolts caught many in Europe and North America by surprise exactly because of that prevalent culture of ignorance. Mainstream Anglo-American academia has exacerbated that problem. Most orthodox political scientists are ill-equipped to look beyond state structures. Hence they tend to ignore movements that operate from the bottom up, from civil societies to the state.

Yet for a decisive period for the future of world politics, the agency of the 'common individual' has been on display. Not since the uprisings that brought down the Iron Curtain and facilitated the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s has there been such an interconnected outpouring of public dissent with such important political consequences. At the time of writing, three of the longest standing dictatorships in the region, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Mu'ammar Qaddafi in Libya, have been swept away by the sheer determination of the people, in the case of Libya accompanied by a period of armed conflict between the state and the opposition, partially aided by NATO. These leaders, whose legitimacy did not come about through democratic means, but was geared toward the authority of the military establishment and the ideal of the charismatic and strong leader, have followed the fate of the late Shah in Iran and the late Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Despite the residues of the authoritarian regimes that continue to be part of the political culture in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), it is safe to argue that demands for democracy, independence and social justice have become the common currency of the societies in the region. Irresistible as it would be to assume that the stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as unique, deviant and ultimately

different has been overcome, the revolts have shown nonetheless that they are not simply reducible to targets in the 'war on terror', that Orientalist depictions of them as the irreconcilable 'other' are outdated and of questionable ideological value.

In that sense the Arab uprisings have given impetus to a trend that started in the middle of the Cold War with intellectual movements such as the *dependencia* school in Latin America, the New Left in Europe, postcolonial studies, feminism, critical theory and other forms of counter-cultural 'movements' that were galvanized by the '68 generation'. Undoubtedly, this period opened up new opportunities to think about politics in a critical mode and challenged the Euro-American-centric legacies in the western social sciences and the humanities. This is the topic of a recent analysis of the emergent field of 'global history' which establishes that in 'contrast to the beginning of the twentieth century, today critiques of western bias have become a more common repertoire in many academic communities throughout the world'. At the same time, it is acknowledged, that 'global hierarchies' continue to exist, that those challenges to the canon do not 'mean that Eurocentric structures and mentalities have disappeared from the global academic landscapes' (Sachsenmaier 2011: 45).

While it is true that today subjugated knowledge is more readily recognizable, that the 'other' has secured a place in the curriculum, the argument that Eurocentric knowledge has been confined in a decisive way may well be too optimistic. If anything, the immediate presence of the 'other' has provoked a hostile reaction, which is transmuting into a counter-movement that has established its own power base within academia and beyond. After all, the theory of a 'clash of civilizations' reinvented by the late Samuel P. Huntington, who was also one of the main advocates against the 'hispanization' of the United States, continues to occupy a central, if also contested place in the curriculum of many political science and international relations departments in North America and, to a lesser extent, in Europe too. Furthermore, the clash narrative has become far more than a mere theoretical or scholarly construct, for it has entered the ideology and practice of political groups, including right wing parties that have secured seats in the parliaments of many European Union countries; for example, the influential Dutch politician Geert Wilders has brought the 'clash' thesis to life by making lurid attacks on Islam the foundation of his career. Even at the center of power, the idea of an inevitable clash between 'the west and the rest' can function as a political device to rally support for military intervention against the latter; for example, Britain's former prime minister

Tony Blair deployed the notion in evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry into the war in Iraq to, in effect, call for military action against Iran. 'At some point the west has to get out of what I think is a wretched policy or posture of apology, believing that we are causing what the Iranians are doing, or what these extremists are doing', he said. Blair elided the adversaries of the 'west' in characteristically sweeping fashion: 'They disagree fundamentally with our way of life, and will carry on unless met with determination and, if necessary, force'.<sup>2</sup>

The power of the idea of an inevitable 'clash of civilizations' between 'the west and the rest' is thus evident; it is too optimistic to argue that most consumers of the 'clash' regime cease to be socialized into accepting the dominant narrative of their societies. Thought control in advanced liberal-capitalist societies is practised in a much more subtle and clandestine way even than George Orwell imagined. A single example of what has been written and said about 'Islam' at the same time as the Arab uprisings were unfolding illustrates the point. Thilo Sarrazin, a board member of Germany's *Bundesbank* and a former senator of finance serving in the Berlin government, published a book entitled *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [*Germany does away with itself*] which argues that high birth rates among Turkish and Arab communities in the country mean that Germany will soon be ruled by 'Muslims', and that 'Turkish genes' are responsible for lowering the 'level of intelligence' in the country.

The great success of Sarrazin's book, helped by huge press exposure, prompted the leading political magazine *Der Spiegel* to ask why Sarrazin has become a national hero. Sarrazin's phobia corresponds to what is happening elsewhere in Europe, such as the electoral success of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, the minaret ban in Switzerland, and the emergence of ultra-nationalist parties in several European Union member states (such as Hungary and Sweden). Thilo Sarrazin's words contain residues of a persistent racist myth that was central to the cod-science of the Nazis (among others): that intelligence is ethnically codified. The obscure American pastor Terry Jones who raised a furore when he threatened to burn a Qur'an in protest at the proposed establishment of an Islamic community center in Manhattan (two blocks away from 'ground zero', the site of the 9/11 attacks) reflects a variant of 'thought control' regarding Muslims: that 'Islam' functions as a formula to aggregate 'Muslims' even more tightly under the label

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<sup>2</sup> 'Blair Criticises Obama's Iran Policy', *Agence France Press* (AFP), 21 January 2011.

of terrorism. The social and geographical distance between these two men suggests that, while there is no all-encompassing anti-Muslim consensus, such attitudes are capable of reaching widely across the political cultures of the contemporary world.

It was, for example, another prominent English novelist, Martin Amis, who in 2006 gave expression to the ‘urge’ to say that Muslims should ‘suffer until they get their house in order’, in a sequence of measures: ‘deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they are from the Middle East, Pakistan, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children’. Amis’s friend, the journalist Christopher Hitchens—who has written widely on George Orwell—in 2007 linked what he called ‘the fascistic subculture’ in Britain to ‘shady exiles from the middle east and Asia who are exploiting London’s traditional hospitality’ and to the projection of an immigrant group that has its origins in a particularly backward and reactionary part of Pakistan. All the individuals mentioned have (or in the case of Terry Jones, been given) privileged access to the media, and their tendentious and in some cases inflammatory views are readily disseminated across the world wide web. In the cacophony that invariably ensues, the voices of reason and empathy tend to be quelled (Adib-Moghaddam 2011: 272ff).

These narratives also sketch the contours of a new strategic enemy, which exists as a projection from the mind of its makers rather than a reality. An insidiously divisive discourse promotes the idea that ‘Muslimness’ is equivalent to an all-encompassing and reductive signifier. The toddler is the Muslim. The neighbor is the Muslim. The prostitute is the Muslim. The gay rights activist is the Muslim. The prisoner is the Muslim. The worker is the Muslim. The feminist is the Muslim. The disabled person is the Muslim. The lover is the Muslim. Muslim—and nothing more. The waste of opportunities for understanding and dialogue here is obvious. But even on their own terms, if writers such as Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens are seeking to distinguish forms of ‘Islamic radicalism’ from a notional ‘good Islam’, then to talk of ‘Muslims’ and ‘Islam’ as if they are integrated entities is self-defeating. Even more as their discourse pronounces the unity and singularity of Islam, and renders coherent what is diversified, differentiated and molecular. The resemblance here is to the views of the leaders of al-Qa’eda, who fervently believe that Islam is an all-encompassing totality which determines everything, all the way down to a person’s individual character traits. In their shared flattening of complex realities these imagined adversaries collude in a dangerous myth of truly Orwellian proportions.

## Postmodern Hybridity

This makes it all the more important to question the underlying bipolar assumption on which the clash regime is based. For in reality, there are no such boundaries, or 'bloody borders' separating a western entity from an Islamic bloc. To think in such dichotomous terms is a residue of a Cold War mentality that seems ever less fitting to the complexities of the postmodern disorder of the early twenty-first century. After all, the contemporary world more and more challenges the supposedly mutually exclusive categories of the 'clash' thesis. For example, the everyday experience of major cities in the western hemisphere pervaded by hybridity and a cosmopolitan spirit, where many other cultural formations (including a sort of Islamo-European-American amalgam) are present. In light of this, policy attempts to 'fix' the division between entities—which have been a feature of British government reactions to the attacks of July 2005 in London, and of subsequent anti-extremist initiatives such as the 'Prevent' strategy—are misconceived and anachronistic, for they assume the existence of a 'west' that is ideologically unified, provincial, and devoid of cosmopolitan spirit and intercultural heritage. In today's globalized world order, this assumption no longer has purchase, for the 'west' and its correlates (east, south, north) are *inside* each other, part of an emerging postmodern constellation.

The consequences of this development are profound. First, the fact that the 'west' has no clear boundary anymore (inner or outer) creates security interdependencies. The global terror campaign of al-Qa'eda has made abundantly clear that no foreign war can be waged without some serious 'blowback'. Second, the globalized world order fuels a particular kind of 'transnational solidarity' exemplified by the opposition around the world to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or the global support for a Palestinian state. This in turn is connected to the evolution since the 1990s of a sort of global public sphere in which local forms of political activism are woven into a borderless structure of resistance. The world wide web makes it easier to connect, organize and fuel diverse political struggles, and gives them a multipolar and decentralized character; an influence that can be seen from the uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia and Syria through to campaigns in Britain against steep increases in university tuition fees to protests in Stuttgart, Germany, against the destruction of a valued railway station. This interconnected and unified field of global politics is a challenge to those who cling to language and mindsets that belong to an era that has passed. Many will ignore it, because (like Geert Wilders or extreme Islamists), an us-versus-them logic that demonizes the 'other' is fundamental to their

strategy of exclusion. But many more could be persuaded that the ‘west’ does not exist as a separate, monolithic entity, and that both domestic politics and international relations need to be reconstituted accordingly. To that end the canon of the western social sciences and humanities have to be opened up even further to cosmopolitan approaches that appreciate different cultural experiences within a common universality.

### **Islamic Imaginaries, New Realities**

A second profound change can be located within the discourse of Islam, or the politics of Islamism. The main factors behind the revolts in the Arab world in the first months of 2011 are familiar—dictatorship, oppression, nepotism, social inequality, structural poverty and demographic changes. But these sociological indicators only reveal themselves in the context of a specific ideational and political reality. People die for the power of ideas, for their honor, for emotions, not necessarily for the price of watermelons. If both ideational and material elements are taken into account, the core of what is happening in western Asia and North Africa can be glimpsed: a truly historical evolution that links Islam to universal principles of freedom, democracy and social equality. These great events are, after all, taking place in Muslim-majority societies, where massive demonstrations are held after Friday prayers, prayer rugs are laid out in front of tanks, nationalist sentiments and slogans are permeated by Islamic symbols. But what is striking about this moment is that this entire Islamic complex is now directed toward democracy and social equality. Islam is realizing its latent social and cultural force, transforming itself into a ‘postmodern Islam’ that is a radical departure from the deterministic, totalitarian ‘Islamism’ of previous generations.

The difference becomes visible by comparing the political thought of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt with that of the movement’s leaders today. The first generation of the Ikhwan, which was established by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, defined Islam as an all-encompassing ideology and instrument to realize explicit political aspirations—an approach that was shared by later figures such as Sayyid Qutb and (allowing for some doctrinal differences) Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers in Iran. Modern Islamism was equipped with enough political vigor, revolutionary fervor and doctrinal content to fight on two fronts. The first was to battle the authoritarian states that emerged after the demise of the Ottoman Empire following the Great War, and within the context of the imperial

system enforced primarily by Britain and France. In the period of intense upheaval and political uncertainty that followed, the paternalistic post-colonial state in western Asia and northern Africa (and elsewhere in the global south) was born.

In this context of insecurity, the military emerged as the primary force in the making and preservation of state power. This had nothing to do (as some western Orientalists argued) with any particular Arab or Muslim propensity for a strong state. It was rather rooted in the historical circumstances of the end of the Ottoman system, and the emergence of nation states with weak bureaucracies and minimal institutional support. The Islamists who contested the new settlement understood themselves to be facing an adversary with two aspects: the militarized state itself, and the neo-imperial intrusions into domestic affairs that continued even after the formal retreat of the empire. The Islamists' credo was *Islam din wa dawla* (Islam is religion and state), a version of the faith that encompassed both the conception of an independent, self-sufficient state and a comprehensive religious system that could satisfy the individual's spiritual needs. This imagined Islam—modeled on a modern version of the *salaf*, the pious compatriots of the Prophet Muhammad—was pitted against an equally imagined west, reduced to a materialistic, invasive and largely evil construct. Occidentalism versus Orientalism; a homogenous alien force counterposed to an elusive, longed-for *homo islamicus*; a minimalistic, dense and total 'Islam' seen against a similarly distorted, monolithic 'west'. This discourse was to give impetus to the revolution in Iran in 1979, a historical event that (along with the struggle against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s) helped open the great, politicized retrieval of history that followed.

Today, the context in which Islams reveal themselves is radically different. In the political arenas of Egypt, Iran, Tunisia and Bahrain, they do not function as revolutionary programs. There is no Khomeini at their head; no Islamist manifesto driving people's actions; no headquarters topped by a green flag coordinating things. Postmodern Islam is diffuse, networked, differentiated, multi-institutional and (in the sense that it is neither paternalistic, nor primarily feminist) 'transsexual'. Postmodern Islam floats freely on the world wide web, and links up with the universal move toward democracy, social equality and resistance to political tyranny. It has put a new face to the book, one that is far less angry and more empathetic to the demands of society and other political actors than was 'Qutbian Islam'.

Postmodern Islam can afford the luxury of being democratic because it is formed in a context that is less fluid and insecure than was that of the

early twentieth century when Islamism was born. Islamism was raw, unmitigated and apostolic in its political prescriptions; by contrast, post-modern Islam matured within the nascent and latent civil societies in West Asia and North Africa, and is filtered through a pluralistic space permeated by many institutions. The Ikhwan itself is in no way a vanguard movement of the kind envisaged by Sayyid Qutb. It is an amalgam of charitable organizations, social endowments and political factions: a pluralistic abstraction rather than a substantive, driven, totalitarian movement. There is no Qutbian vanguard that is specific and deterministic about the contours of the 'Islamic state'. Rather, there is an 'Avicennian' political philosophy that is pragmatic and cautious, indeterminate in its prescriptions and post-ideological in its political syntax.

In this emerging discourse, prescriptions such as 'Islam is. . .' and 'Islam must be. . .' are succeeded by formulations such as 'Islam may add. . .' and 'Islam could be. . .' This is a profound shift, one that is discernible in many speeches of the leaders of the Ikhwan in Egypt and the al-Nahda (Renaissance) party in Tunisia, as well as by proclamations and strategic papers of some of the reformists in Iran. So this is a truly historic moment, one which at least promises to sweep away the last residues of Orientalism—and, as one component, the false notion that there is an inert Arab or Muslim personality prone to authoritarianism.

Until Tunisia erupted, the dominant narrative was that Muslim societies are beset by radicalism and that al-Qa'eda is a viable political force. Over the past decade, the fight against 'Muslim radicalism' (or what Bernard Lewis infamously called 'Muslim rage') has seen huge resources allocated to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the regime-change strategy in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Gaza; and to huge military budgets and many national security papers. Now, a deep transformation is exposing the failures and follies of this approach. Islam's own transformation is a key agent of this process of renewal. For the first time since the violent rupture of colonialism, the range of discourses signifying the meaning of Islam is geared toward universal aspirations for freedom and democracy. Certainly there have been other periods when Islam revealed its humanistic resources as I have argued elsewhere. But today, Arab and Muslim societies are equipping themselves with a political language that could institutionalize those norms systematically and for the long run. Islamism is slowly dying, and with it the myth that a hybrid religion can be reduced to a monolithic political ideology. This moment signals the onset of postmodernity in the Arab and Islamic worlds: a radical, refreshing and emancipatory moment in human history.

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