Globalization and the Middle East: Part One
Why Islamic societies of the Middle East are so opposed to globalization
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McDonald's outlet in Kuwait

Probably no area in the world resists—at least explicitly—globalization to an extent equaling that of the Islamic Middle East. The majority of regimes, opposition movements, and intellectuals in the region are consciously anti-globalization. Moreover, there is no part of the world where violence is more often used in the anti-globalization struggle, most notably by Osama bin Laden but generally by all radical Islamist movements.

How can this extremely important phenomenon be explained? It is useful to begin by setting some basic definitions.

First, globalization refers to the spread throughout the globe of ideas, customs, institutions, and attitudes originated in one part of the world. At present these are usually Western in origin. Thus, it is easy to see globalization as largely equivalent to Westernization. Regions like North and South America, Europe and Africa, and even Asia to a lesser extent are more open to Westernization and globalization, in part because they have considerable Western components already. Nationalism comes dramatically into play when certain aspects of Westernization are seen as challenges to a nation’s ethos.

Second, much of globalization is related to what historically is called modernization, a set of behaviors and beliefs that challenge traditional society. Globalization is seen as a major threat to tradition. Where religion is far more traditional in its practice, the defense of religion also conflicts with the acceptance of modernization.

Third, the two factors that supposedly make globalization attractive are those of benefits and cultural synthesis. If globalization makes life better, raises living standards, strengthens the society, and stabilizes the existing order (or helps replace it with an order its citizens deem to be better), people will prefer to accept more globalization.

The concept of cultural synthesis means that the society's existing or traditional ways can be blended with new and foreign ideas to make a stronger hybrid. The modern history of Japan, for example, shows how such a synthesis can be constructed. The society is also selective in choosing what it wants to accept and reject, with those values or institutions most destructive of tradition being blocked.
Ultimately, then, globalization is accepted if and when it is perceived not as destroying the local society but helping it to survive and flourish in a partly new form. Finally it should be noted that even the most extreme explicit rejection of globalization does not mean that globalization fails to infiltrate into the society. In Iran, where the Islamic republic has attempted to block many foreign cultural and intellectual influences, it has often not succeeded. Indeed, these concepts have been taken up by an opposition enjoying support from a majority of the population. Leaders of this opposition, notably President Muhammad Khatami, explicitly speak of the need for cultural synthesis, while suggesting that globalization is a two-way street and the West can also learn from their society. Let’s now examine several points that help explain the Islamic Middle East’s rejection of globalization. Although it may seem paradoxical, a key reason for the rejection is the lack of previous cultural penetration of the Islamic Middle East by Western culture, ideas and institutions. No matter how much such influence can be found it is relatively far less than in other parts of the world.

North America, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand are Western societies. Whatever their local differences, even the former Soviet bloc countries of eastern and central Europe have a fairly easy time adapting to Western culture after up to 75 years behind the "iron curtain." South America is largely the product of European (especially Spanish) cultural, religious, and linguistic influence. Sub-Saharan Africa has a parallel, if lesser, experience to South America, in part because of the extent of colonialism and the dismantling of traditional society. In part, too, European language and cultural influence transcends the potentially conflicting societies of tribes that would make nation-state existence impossible or highly unstable.

The situation of Asia is a bit more complex but it has proven to be quite adaptable in the field of cultural borrowing. English has become the lingua franca not only in the former British colonies of South Asia, but increasingly in Southeast Asia and East Asia. In general, Asian religion has seemed most tolerant toward the apparent contradictions of globalization. For whatever reason, though, many Asian societies have embraced cultural synthesis and been most successful in developing it.

In the Middle East, the picture is dramatically different. Almost everywhere, Christianity has remained a marginal religion, and even where it exists has either had little national influence--the Copts in Egypt--or a declining role--the Maronites in Lebanon. Islam, a religion influenced by Judaism and Christianity in its origins but rarely since, sees itself very much apart from a global consensus and retains its own claim to hegemony. The very size and cohesion of an Islamic community builds a religious, and hence cultural, wall against many aspects of globalization.

It is also important to remember that Islam is a religion with its own set of laws and a claim to provide the proper order for society. Thus, many elements of globalization can contradict--or be thought to conflict with--Islam, which is far less the case with Taoism, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Clearly, too, Islam has been going through a period of reinforcement and regularization--fueled in part through the use of modern technology.

Rejection of Western culture can also be seen through the limited use of European languages in the Middle East. English, while empowered by being the major language of global interchange, has been very much restricted. French has declined sharply as an important language in North Africa, and other European languages are almost totally absent. The principal language of all the Islamic Middle East is Arabic, except in Iran, and Arabic is also the language of Islam. The existence of a large and culturally
powerful Arabic community builds a linguistic wall against the penetration of Western languages which are such an important aspect of globalization.

As a result of these and other factors, the basic elements of globalization are seen as more alien in the Middle East than elsewhere and are thus far more likely to be seen as hostile. Latin America might worry about being overwhelmed by music and food items, but the Islamic Middle East is likely to look at the entire list of globalization products and ideas as dangerous.

One final point in this context is the far lower degree of what might be called elite globalization. For example, in Czarist Russian times the elite tried to be as French as possible in their manners and culture. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, many elements of the contemporary political and financial elite are cosmopolitan in their behavior, habits, and ideas. Yet this process has proceeded far less in that region than elsewhere, partly because of the factors mentioned above, and partly due to strong public pressure to maintain traditional or national authenticity by opposing external influences.

Another important aspect of Middle Eastern opposition to globalization is the existence there of a fully developed alternative world view. Without going into great length to analyze the contents of that doctrine, it includes both Arab nationalism and Islam as prime ingredients. Globalization is seen as a surrender to a dominant, non-indigenous standpoint. Not only does this lie in contradiction to the prevailing system, but it threatens to undermine it. Rather than adapting to the world, the world is supposed to adjust to Middle Eastern beliefs. And many--especially among those with power--are willing to pay the material and historical cost of their "anti-pragmatic" attitude.

On one hand, the Arab nationalists, Islamists, and the varying blends of the two, still believe that they are destined to emerge as dominant in the world, and certainly in the region. On the other hand, they have a profound inferiority complex, a sense of being behind which makes them feel all the more vulnerable. Precisely because they suspect that the emerging global system might be superior to theirs, in its practical effects at least, they fear any compromise will bring total absorption and doubt their ability to survive a cultural synthesis. In this sense, they reject the challenge that many other societies are quite ready to undertake with greater confidence of keeping what they have and adding useful new features.

Still another problem is the nature of the political systems in Iran and every Arab state, as well as the social and intellectual structures that derive from them. Whereas in Europe, modernization swept away autocratic regimes, in the Middle East dictatorships have learned how to survive and mobilize mass support. While repression is one way they do so, equally or more important are such tools as demagoguery, the creation of a supportive and pervasive system, and the persuasion of the public to support their governments. This includes the use of such trump cards as claiming that anti-globalization is the only way of defending the Arab nation and Islam, as well as anti-American and anti-Israel sentiments. By presenting change as dangerous and compromise as surrender, the regimes keep the support of their own people while also discouraging them from supporting certain elements of globalization --such as democracy, free enterprise, civil and human rights--which would increase opposition to the current rulers or even overthrow them.

At the same time, they restrict and tame the forces usually associated with modernization and repress those demanding democracy, free enterprise, civil liberties and so on. The independent business class is kept weak by the state's domination of the economy, sacrificing efficiency and wealth for control. The
middle class remains dependent on the state through the need for its patronage or direct employment. Intellectuals work for state-controlled enterprises and are made the bearers of the state’s ideology. Even the opposition echoes the hegemonic doctrine while simply demanding it be implemented more thoroughly. Islamists share with the ruling Arab nationalists most of their ideas, including opposition to globalization or modernizing reforms, while simply giving it a different flavor. Indeed, after the failure of Islamist revolutions, the tone of Islamist rhetoric has turned to be even more directly and violently against the West, as seen in the jihadist movements of the early twenty-first century. The iron wall against globalization is actually becoming thicker and higher as time goes on rather than dissolving before the supposedly irresistible onslaught. Of course, Iran, where Islamist forces actually gained power, is the exception here.

While there are Arab liberal forces, they remain shockingly weak and it would be no exaggeration to say, in my estimate, that they muster not more than one percent popular support in many countries. Nor is it more than wishful thinking to conclude that the next generation will be inevitably more open. It arguably will be more closed, having been the subject of much more intense and systematic indoctrination on both the Islamist and nationalist fronts.

In many countries and areas of the world, the idea of cultural synthesis has gained great favor. The terms of the debate have moved on to discuss what should be retained and what borrowed. In contrast, in much of the Middle East, cultural synthesis is equated with treason.

Experience can also lead one to question the idea of what might be called technological determinism. For example, television, radio, and cassettes can be used to carry Islamist ideological lectures as well as rock music. Indeed, the use of technology--starting with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s propaganda campaign for a revolution in Iraq in 1978--has distinguished the ability to tighten controls.

Satellite television, notably al-Jazira in Qatar, has also been employed to spread extremist doctrine most effectively. Al-Jazira programs often feature a debate between a modernist and a militant nationalist or Islamist. The program’s host makes it clear that the latter side is correct and the former argument is unacceptable or even evil. Screened telephone calls then support the radical side without exception.

Students who have studied in the West more often than not return home to reinforce even further a rejection of the society they have just experienced. Having seen the West, they may focus on its shortcomings or fear the effects of such ideas or institutions in their own countries. Indeed, by feeling tempted, they may feel guilty and thus want to reinforce their own national, traditional, and religious character. It should be noted that many of the September 11 hijackers had experience of living in the West, reinterpreting Islam in a way that focused on making it a shield against any Western or globalization’s influence and a sword to destroy those things altogether.

Arguably, there is a subtle effect in the spread of culture such as books, television programs, movies, and material items such as cars, computers, and clothes. Only in the long run will it be possible to see how influential such things might be. Yet the depth of Middle Eastern opposition to globalization should not be underestimated. Every indication is that it will extend years, even decades, into the future.

1 The area being referred to here includes that between Morocco and Afghanistan, with the exception of Israel and Turkey. Obviously, there are great differences among countries; contrasts between classes, regions, or ethnic groups; separating governmental policies and the daily practices of citizens, etc. This article seeks only to make some useful general points as a start for further research.
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