THE POLITICS OF CHAOS IN MUSLIM LANDS: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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At the peak of the Islamist revolutionary moment in the early 1990s, many Western pundits warned that the Islamic tide was unstoppable and likely to sweep away failed socialist and nationalist Arab or Muslim regimes. The turban had replaced the crown in Iran. Egypt and Algeria were on the brink of falling to religiously based insurgencies. Sudan was Islamized from the bottom up. Afghanistan and Pakistan were in the grip of socio-political turmoil with Islamic activists in the ascendancy. The Taliban burst on the Afghan-Pakistan scene like a wildfire. Lebanon's Hizbollah and Palestine's Hamas led the *muqawama* (armed resistance) to Israeli military occupation.

In a nutshell, political reform (in various forms – mainstream and revolutionary) dominated the landscape all over the Muslim world.

One of the few dissenting voices was Olivier Roy, a French sociologist and authority on religiously based social movements. Challenging the prevalent conventional wisdom, his sensational *The Failure of Political Islam* (1994) argued that the Islamist revolution was already a spent force and, more importantly, an intellectually and historically bankrupt one.

According to Roy, Islamist movements offered neither a concrete politico-economic program nor a new model and vision for society: the slogan "Islam is the solution" could not resolve the Muslims' developmental crises. Nowhere was the Islamists' failure more blatant, he noted, than in their inability to go beyond Islam's founding texts, be self-critical, and overcome traditional divisions and narrow sectarian loyalties.

Roy asserted that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary Iran, often celebrated as a pioneering Islamist project, made two key mistakes. Rather than reaching out to the entire ummah (Muslim community), it immediately locked itself into a Shiite ghetto by limiting its appeal to coreligionists and quickly reverted to an ultra-conservative social model that echoed Saudi Arabia's own brand of Sunni puritanism. The only remnant of Khomeini's vision of a new pan-Islamism, argued Roy, was the rhetoric. The politically radicalized Islamist activists hoped to create a new regional order based on Islam, but the hard logic of history, power, states, sectarianism, ethnicity, and borders proved far more enduring than they acknowledged in their propaganda.

Although Roy was dead wrong about the

failure of political Islam, his hypothesis engendered a huge debate among scholars, activists, and policymakers in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. He was right to point out that the efforts by such militant Islamists as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Egyptian Islamic Group, along with their Algerian counterparts, to foment widespread revolution were all failures. But he underestimated the durability and popularity of political Islam in particular, as well as the mainstream, moderate Islamists who represent the overwhelming majority of religiously oriented activists, as a socio-political force to be reckoned with in many Arab and Muslim societies.

Political Islam remains a potent force in Muslim lands.

A decade later, in *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, Roy sought to understand and explain how conservative "neofundamentalism," which primarily seeks to Islamize society from the bottom up, superseded revolutionary Islamism, which wants to capture political power in order to Islamize society by autocratic fiat from the top down.

Roy documented how versions of this neofundamentalism had spreading among uprooted Muslim youths, particularly the children and grandchildren of Muslims who migrated to the West. According to him, these new fundamentalists advocated multiculturalism, but only as a means of rejecting efforts to

integrate into Western society. And like their coreligionists living in the West, even Muslims in the Middle East and parts of Asia may feel like members of a besieged minority because of the sweeping changes brought on by Westernization and globalization. Sometimes you really can't go home again.

In *Globalized Islam*, Roy addressed two main issues: post-Islamism and the global dispersion of Islam across modern nation-states. Roy's "global Muslims" were those who had settled permanently in the West and the neofundamenalists who distance themselves from a given national Muslim culture and stress their membership in a worldwide community of believers.

Once again Roy turned received wisdom on its head, arguing that despite the radicals' backlash, the Muslim world itself was going through a process of transformation and secularization, one that paralleled the re-Islamization of daily life in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"The real secularists," he wrote, "are the Islamists and neofundamentalists, because they want to bridge the gap between religion and a secularised society." "Islam is experiencing secularisation," he concluded, "but in the name of fundamentalism."

For Roy, the root causes of the social upheaval roiling the Muslim world and the jihadist revolt against the West lie in

the spreading and deepening Westernization and globalization of Muslim societies, particularly over the past thirty years. Many Muslims are anxious about the loss of their Islamic identity and the encroachment of alien Western ideas about education, pop culture, and women's rights.

Al-Qaeda's tactics, Roy asserts, are grounded not in Islamic tradition, but in more recent European radical, leftist, and Third-Worldist movements. In this sense, "bin Ladenism" represents both a rupture with mainstream Islam and an import from the West. Roy's analysis of these revolutionary Islamists parts ways with the lazy Western perception that these people are simply deeply traditional types who seek to impose a centuries-old version of Islam on modern societies.

While thought-provoking and critical, *Globalized Islam* greatly exaggerated the role of uprooted Muslims living in the West as the driving force behind jihadism. To support his thesis, Roy cited the case of Al-Qaeda's jihadists: expatriates who choose to fight for an imaginary ummah rather than their homelands. He suggested that the Egyptians, Algerians, Yemenis, and Saudis who follow bin Laden's siren song made a conscious decision to wage jihad against the West, not their local rulers.

But throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, militant Islamists launched a fierce assault against their own rulers. Only when their onslaught ran

out of steam did they decide to target the United States and its allies. These local jihadists, like Ayman al-Zawahiri, paid lip service to the ummah, but their first goal was to capture power in their native lands; the same is true of bin Laden.

The point to highlight here is that politically radicalized Muslims living in the West represent only a tiny, inconsequential element of the vibrant and integrated Muslim communities in European countries.

Now, in a slim volume entitled *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*, Roy convincingly argues that there is no "geostrategy of Islam" that can explain all of the present conflicts, from Palestine to bin Laden to the riots in the Paris suburbs. Such an idea is no more than a "self-fulfilling prophecy, for it transforms an imagined situation into a policy and therefore gives substance to this essentialist dogma."

Although *The Politics of Chaos* is a policy-oriented book that lacks the analytical and scholarly depth of his previous texts, it offers a critical European commentary on the current debate raging in Western capitals about the so-called war on terror, Iraq, and the weight of Islam in the political process.

Roy's goal is to demolish the myth of a monolithic Islam united against the Christian West. The claim that the Muslim world is at war with the West is a fantasy, he writes, for this

"Muslim world" exists only as an ideological construct: most of the conflicts raging in the Middle East pit Muslims against Muslims.

Roy stresses the importance of local contexts and internal tensions and cleavages in fueling the ongoing instability and chaos in the Middle East. In an elegant survey of the various local conflicts destabilizing the region, he demonstrates that each has its own history and dynamics, independent of Islam or great power intervention: "Each local conflict has it own history and follows its own course, the most striking examples being the rivalry between Iran and Iraq, which echoes the border battle between the Persian and Ottoman empires, or Pakistan in its endless quest for legitimacy and territory, the Palestinian and Israeli peoples' difficulty in making the transition from existential to territorial conflict."

The driving force behind the spread of socio-political chaos in the Middle East is not Islam, he notes, but deeper undercurrents of national, ethnic, and tribal rivalries as well as uneven processes of state-led modernization in poor and traditional societies.

The critical question in this work is the role of Islam in a newly global context and the relationship between Islamic publics and notionally Islamic states. What lies at the center of Roy's writing is this very relationship between Islam and the state, as well as the

problematic nature of the many constructed Middle Eastern states, with their lines drawn haphazardly by colonial Britain after the end of World War I.

In his view, three fault lines or traumas mark the contemporary history of the Arab Middle East, and none of them have anything to do with Islam as such; rather, they arise from the translation of Arab identity into political terms. The first trauma, in 1918, was the collapse of the project to build a pan-Arab nation out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, as promised by the British; the second one was the establishment of the state of Israel in the heart of the Arab world and the subsequent Arab defeats at the hands of the small Jewish state; and the third one was the destruction of the balance between Shiism and Sunnism and the Shia revival.

Although Roy is correct to draw attention to the internal and local roots of chaos in the Middle East, he underestimates the role of the great powers in fueling regional conflicts and fighting wars-by-proxy. Time and again external players have internationalized local disputes and exacerbated tensions. While local conflicts do have their own independent dynamics, it is misleading to neglect their interconnectedness. For example, the Palestine-Israel conflict intrudes on and intersects with other regional problems, thereby producing further socio-political chaos. The war in Iraq has had the same effect.

It is also surprising that in his effort to situate the conflicts in the Middle East in their own context, Roy falls into the trap of dismissing Islam as a key factor in the grammar and sociology of Arab politics.

He has little to say about why Islam is the only viable discourse of opposition and an effective mobilizational tool against both Western influence in the Middle East and authoritarian Arab and Muslim rulers.

Obviously, Islam matters and matters greatly; it resonates with Muslims. Islamists or religiously oriented activists are the dominant force in several key Muslim countries.

But Roy's broader argument makes sense: the American "global war on terror" has erased distinctions, nuances, differences, and conceptual boundaries between Al-Qaeda-style terrorists, Islamists proper (those who try to build Islamic political institutions), fundamentalists who want to live under sharia law, and cultural conservatives who advocate communal autonomy under multiculturalism. These latter groups, as Roy observes, do not represent an existential threat to their societies or to the West.

Driven by ideology and a messianic zeal to restructure Arab and Muslim societies and politics, the Bush foreign policy team lost sight of ends and means and ignored the self-limiting nature of Al-Qaeda, which remains a fringe element instead of a viable social movement: it does not possess the capacity for large-scale socio-political mobilization**.**

Despite its bloody tactics, Roy reminds readers that Al-Qaeda's violence has no strategic orientation to give political direction to its activities, because the bin Laden group possesses no lasting institutions or political roots: "Al-Qaeda is in essence a deterritorialised, global organization, relatively distanced from the Middle East issues, with no political roots in the Muslim populations."

Similarly, according to Roy, although moderate Islamist movements have more political traction, they also run up against their limits: the failure of the Islamist political model in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, and the fact that they must consistently push beyond an Islamist agenda in order to maintain political momentum in any national arena.

Western states' inability to distinguish between different types of Islamized politics leads directly to impotence and compounds failure. According to Roy, America's enemies, like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, have been the beneficiaries of these shortsighted and sweeping policies.

"It is Washington's bitterest enemy, Iran, that has gained the most from this new situation, which is likely to lead to further confrontations. Presented as the precondition for the eradication of the causes of terrorism, the military intervention in Iraq has proved to be a fiasco, which has played into the hands of America's designated enemies."

The only intelligent way out, Roy notes, is for Western diplomacy to engage serious Islamist political movements, such as Hizbollah, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood and to treat them as rational interlocutors and legitimate representatives of sizable segments of their publics.

"The refusal to distinguish between movements which are primarily political," he writes, "and others which are purely terrorist makes action impossible."

According to Roy, establishing a strategic set of priorities will enable Western states to focus their efforts on genuine enemies like Al-Qaeda and arrest the spread of chaos in the Middle East.

While Roy argues conclusively that chaos in the region cannot be blamed on some mythic clash between Islam and the West, and that Western interventions have often worsened matters, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East* presents rational choices that the West can take to arrest the spread of further disorder. We can only hope that future American administrations will heed them.

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