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## Western Fundamentalism and Islam

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Last week Hillary Clinton told a town hall meeting that “For more than half a century, the world has benefited from exceptional American leadership, and an international system..... The sources of America’s power are enduring and durable - our values, our global vision, our productivity, our ingenuity, our incredible demographic diversity - but none of these advantages is a birthright. Every generation of Americans has to re-establish their legitimacy and credibility and has to re-imagine how America will be going forward. So let’s nurture those values, let’s keep making the tough choices, and let’s be sure we are part of securing American leadership well into this century”.

Equally Robert Kagan (*The price of Power*) calls it nonsensical that the US faces a watershed moment and must decide whether to increase an already massive debt in order to continue being the world’s sheriff or restrain its military missions to focus on its economic recovery. Though Leon Panetta has declared that the backbone of al-Qaeda has been broken terrorism and counterinsurgency still retain their foremost positions in global threat perception. Now that we know the Western financial wizards were mainly responsible for the global recession threatening international stability time, perhaps, has come to assess if “Islamic fundamentalism” is a greater threat or the refusal to reshape of the international institutions that remained undisturbed since the end of the World War II giving more power and influence to the developing countries to bring the global ship to an even keel.

Contrary to common belief that fundamentalism only lies in Islam alone Walter Russell Mead of the US Council of Foreign Relations (God’s country - Foreign Affairs - September/ October 2006) described the US, the only super power in the world today, as a nation where religion

shapes its character, helps form America's ideas about the world, and influences ways Americans respond to events beyond its shores. Currently three strains envelop the nation- a strict tradition that can be called fundamentalists; a progressive and ethical tradition which may be called liberal Christianity; and a broader evangelical order. These three competing streams often influence the ways about the US' role in foreign policy. Though evangelicals straddle the divide between the fundamentalists and the liberals, they resemble the fundamentalists in many ways. Self-identified evangelicals accounted for 40% of votes for President Bush in 2004 and the white evangelicals voted 78% in the same election. They also wield considerable influence in the Congressional and Senate elections with the result that the number of self-identified evangelicals in the Congress have risen from 10% in 1970 to 25% in 2004.

On the question of Israel increasing evangelical political power have translated into deepening US support for Israel in the US administration and Congress as opposed to liberal Christian establishment who prefer to take a moderate view of the crisis in the Middle East. This support for Israel is not a recent phenomenon. In the nineteenth century the evangelicals repeatedly requested the US administrations to establish a refuge in the holy land for the Jews to escape European and Ottoman Empire's persecution. This support for the Jews was rooted in the belief of the evangelicals that the Christians are the new and true children of Israel and that the Jews have a place in God's plan in the sense that the Jews would return to the holy land before the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. In the interregnum the Jews would continue to reject Christ, a belief that reduces tension between the Christians and the Jews. "For evangelicals" writes Mead "the fact the Jewish people have survived through the millennia and that they have returned to their ancient home is proof that God is real, that the Bible is inspired, and that the Christian religion is true... They see in the weakness, defeat, and poverty of the Arab world ample evidence that God curses those who curse Israel". Important evangelical leaders like John Hagee advocates that should Iran move to attack Israel the US must be prepared "to stop this evil enemy in its tracks". The liberals, however, have come to sympathize with the Palestinian movement because of Israel's human rights abuses in the occupied lands. But the liberal Christians and secular intellectuals have been losing ground simply because evangelicals have been increasing social and political power.

In this scenario Marxian explanation of religion as an opiate to soothe the pain of existence or Freudian description of religious beliefs "to exorcise the terror of nature; men's efforts to reconcile to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death, and (that) they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them" have been totally displaced from people's mind and consequent political discourse. In Europe, however, despite collective guilt still felt by the Europeans for the holocaust they are by and large more just and equitable in their judgment on the Middle East crisis. The Europeans have been more strident in their denunciation of Israeli wanton aggression of Lebanon. In the G-8 summit held at St. Petersburg in Russia then French President Jacques Chirac described the Israeli mission was to destroy the Lebanese economy by destroying its infrastructures. At that summit President Bush appeared to be lone voice of discord in support of Israel while the rest, in varying degrees, were critical of the Israeli aggression.

But then the Muslim world could, perhaps, try to mitigate the clash of two competing ideologies within the Islamic world and disengage the clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity now being propagated. One way could be further democratization of the Muslim society. Though doubts remained about Bush administration's sincerity about bringing democracy to the Islamic world it is, however, believed that

the Bush administration had come to the conclusion that “democracy deficit” tolerated by the successive US administrations in the past responding to the situations demanded by the cold war resulted in dictatorial regimes in many Muslim countries where dissent often meant being sent to the gulags while profligate elites lived life of moral degeneration.

Later the conviction of the liberal thinkers embraced by the neo-cons gave life to the belief that democracies do not go to war against one another simply because waging war by a democracy would need distilled approval of different branches of the administration making it a difficult venture. The Western world, therefore, has now realized that policies followed hitherto had given birth to failed states in the vacuum left by the cold war which helped incubate the vitriolic contagion of al-Qaeda variety. Unfortunately the panic following the 9/11 events new cold war warriors equated Islamic fundamentalism with political Islam.

When George W Bush declared his intention to democratize the Islamic world question arose whether democratization of Muslim societies would necessarily reduce terrorism and prevent fresh recruits to the terrorist outfits. Vermont University Professor Gregory Gause held the view that since the al-Qaidists were not fighting for democracy but for the establishment of what they believed to be a purist version of an Islamic state there was no reason to believe that a tidal wave of democracy would wash away terrorist activities. Political reforms, therefore, has been suggested by some as a possible solution. But liberal thinker Paul Berman stated that this approach might not succeed as al-Qaida ideology and radical Islam are driven by a fear and hatred of liberal Islam which they see as a “hideous schizophrenia” of the West that divides the state from religion and promotes individual freedom.

Some believe that modernity rather than democracy should be used as the most important tool to fight global terrorism. Since modernity involves more than improved material conditions and entails a transformation in beliefs and philosophies, al-Qaedaists with their narrow interpretation of religious dogmas would lose their appeal. But then again it has also been argued that al-Qaedaist appeal is not due to lack of modernity in the Islamic society but due to its excess which in the view of so-called purists is instrumental in contributing to social “degeneration” of the Western culture having contagion-effect on Muslim societies.

In the context of the above one is not certain whether the Bush administration’s interaction with Islam and Muslim countries was not so self-interested that the old cold war policy of coalescing with quasi-military or oppressive regimes had not become expedient and was no longer regarded as a contradiction of principles and morality which the Bush administration was preaching.

In any analysis of whether there has been any change in American policy particularly towards the Muslim world it would be appropriate to refer to President Bush’s address to the 61st United Nations General Assembly. References made in his speech to the first competitive Presidential elections in Algeria, voting rights given to women in Kuwait, holding of municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, multi-party Presidential elections in Yemen and Egypt, and his direct messages to the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran Syria and Palestine were note worthy. Bush administration’s reluctance to admit that the root cause of the turbulence in the Middle East was its refusal to pressurize Israel for an equitable solution of the Palestinian problem had been putting the moderate rulers in the Islamic world on a

confrontational course with their citizens. This difficulty faced by many Arab governments was voiced by King Abdullah of Jordan where governments with failed political and economic policies are treading on razor's edge to find a common ground between those clamouring for Western model of liberal democracy and market economy and those refusing modernity are trying to take the society back to its pristine 6th century roots. While this struggle for the soul of Islam is raging in the Islamic world the Bush administration had taken the lead for the atonement of Western guilt complex for the holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis and centuries of injustice meted out to the Jews by the Christians by giving Israel a free hand in Palestine and then in Lebanon.

Consequently, wrote columnist Roger Cohen, "whatever vestigial standing the US had as an honest broker in the Middle East has disappeared with the Bush administration's embrace of Israel's sustained use of force in response to Hezbollah's murderous July 12 cross border raid... Hezbollah equals terrorism, terrorism must be crushed, ruthlessness is the only way forward, and damn the consequences". In the same vein former UN Deputy Secretary General Mark Brown also reportedly felt that given the discouraging US track record in the Middle East where the US was regarded as the second greatest enemy after Israel the US efforts to get through a resolution in the UNSC on the Lebanese situation had expectedly failed. Even Tony Blair had told the World Affairs Council at Los Angeles that the West was unlikely to win the battle against "global extremism" unless the war on terror was fought "at the level of values as much as force, unless we show we are even handed, fair and just in our application of those values to the world".

Basically Tony Blair had come around to Harvard Professor Joseph Nye Jr's advocacy of "smart power" which is defined as a combination of hard power (military power and economic power) and soft power (culture, political values, and having moral authority). Nye explains that soft power rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preference of the others. Though in the present day world of US nuclear primacy and her uncontestable military might it may sound academic, yet the argument advanced by Richard Nixon in the 1970s that the only time in history the world had seen extended period of peace was when there was a balance of power is profoundly meaningful. "It is when one nation becomes infinitely more powerful" Nixon added "in relation to its potential competitor that the danger of war arises". After the Second World War Presidents Roosevelt and Truman could have created a great Roman empire (intervening in another polity without actually governing it) but they preferred to establish the United Nations and the Breton Woods institutions. Fifty years later another US President armed with the doctrine of preemption was asking the international community to subordinate to its hard power to the principles of the UN Charter (articles 1 section 4, article 2 section 4, articles 41, 42 and 51; principles VI and VII of the Nuremberg Tribunal; and article VI of the US Constitution)-all of which in spirit and letter hold the doctrine of pre-emption as a flagrant and unconscionable violation of law.

Bush administration's wish to usher in the fourth wave of democratization (first being pre-colonial, the second being post-colonial and the third being in East Europe, Latin America and East Asia) in Broader Middle East and North Africa, met with disappointment if the current Arab Spring is to be discounted. Western thinkers are unanimous in their belief that building blocks for a modern democratic political culture are not elections, parties and legislatures. Rather building blocks are supportive cultural values-political trust, social tolerance, basic political liberties and gender equality. While it may not be possible to build these blocks in an election or two, unwavering international cooperation

with Iraq along with clear US intention of non- interference in Middle East oil politics and a more just approach to the resolution of the Palestinian issue would have been more fruitful. The trust deficit that was built up during the Bush administration was to a significant extent reduced by President

Barak Obama who made it abundantly clear that the war on terror was not a war on Islam. Colin Dueck writing on Obama foreign policy mentioned in particular of the “Arab governments with varying allegiances in relation to the United States. The Arab Spring of 2011 presented the Obama administration with a classic U.S. foreign policy dilemma of whether to bolster or pressure American allies in response to indigenous popular pressures. One can certainly sympathize with the need to balance U.S. national security imperatives with democratic aspirations, and to use a case-by-case approach, but Obama’s accommodationist foreign policy assumptions led him to make some strange choices.

Specifically, the failure to make a clear distinction between America’s allies and its adversaries led him to be too hard on some of its allies and too easy on some of its enemies within the Arab world. In the case of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Obama publicly and abruptly abandoned a longstanding U.S. ally. In the case of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, the Obama administration publicly and abruptly abandoned a longstanding U.S. ally, with little indication that any successor would be friendlier to U.S. interests on vital issues such as Counter terrorism. There is a strong possibility that the bitterly anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood will assume increased power in Egypt, but this does not seem to especially bother Obama, who likes to distinguish between radical Islamists like Osama Bin Laden and radical Islamists amenable to reason and accommodation. In the case of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, the Obama administration went remarkably easy for quite some time on the regime’s violent crackdown against peaceful protestors, under the premise that the U.S. needed Syria on a range of regional issues such as peace negotiations with Israel. Again, the mistake was in a failure to recognize that the Syrian government is in fact a staunch adversary of Israel, the United States, and U.S. interests within the Middle East. But for an American president unwilling to think in these stark terms, no such clarifying distinctions are necessary or constructive, since they supposedly divert from possibilities for fruitful cooperation.

Finally, in the case of Libya, as Muammar el-Qaddafi launched a crackdown of his own, Obama made the strangest choice of all, settling on an incoherent policy of extremely circumspect humanitarian intervention under the strictest possible limitations. Whether one was a robust humanitarian, a realist, or a foreign policy hawk, the painfully half-hearted manner of Obama’s Libyan intervention made no sense whatsoever. It made sense only in purely domestic political terms - or to those who believe that asking the permission of the Arab League when sending U.S. armed forces into battle is intrinsically important. Then again, Obama and many of his core supporters view multilateralism in foreign policy as not only useful, but as an end in itself, since it indicates American goodwill and humility. They therefore judge an intervention like that in Libya primarily on whether it is done in a circumspect, shared, and multilaterally approved fashion. This is an amazing primary criterion on which to launch and conduct armed combat, but apparently it looks perfectly reasonable to the president and his inner circle.

Throughout the events of the Arab Spring, Obama seemed to want autocratic regional governments - however friendly or unfriendly to the

United States - to accommodate popular uprisings with at least some token liberal reforms. Arab governments that failed to cooperate in this minimal way tended to lose Obama's support. Yet here as elsewhere, expectations of mutual accommodation triggered by American instruction proved unrealistic. On the contrary, the failure to distinguish clearly and accurately between U.S. allies and U.S. adversaries in the Middle East left the administration without a reliable compass, floundering and out of its depth". But now already starting on his re-election campaign he has stressed on "ironclad" security arrangement with Israel despite Professors John Mersheimer and Stephen Walt's explicit warning that with the end of cold war the strategic importance of Israel to US vital interests have reduced considerably and the US should now adopt a more even handed policy of the Palestine issue. It is universally recognized that Israel as the possessor of unspecified number of nuclear weapons does not need any help even in the unlikely case of attack by Arab states.

The Economist (July 20 2011) mentioned Arab American Institute's James Zogby's assertion that Palestine remains the "existential, defining" issue in the Arab world and the dislike for the US by the Arabs that slumped with the invasion of Iraq began to rise with Obama's election in 2008 and his June 2009 speech at Cairo where he said "that the Palestinian people -- Muslims and Christians -- have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years they've endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations -- large and small -- that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: The situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own". But the recent poll by James Zogby finds Barak Obama's popularity has gone down considerably due to Arab peoples' view of American interference as obstacle to peace and security.

The forthcoming Presidential election in the US brings no good news on the Palestine issue. Both front running Republican candidates-Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney-are mouthing anti-Muslim slogans. Gingrich accuses the democrats of trying to impose a "secular-socialist" agenda with "relentless anti-religious bias" potentially dominated by "radical Islamists". He warned that the Sharia or Islamic law poses a threat to the US as grave as or graver than terrorism. Addressing an audience at the American Enterprise Institute last July he said that stealth jihadis use political, cultural, societal, religious, intellectual tools while violent jihadis use violence. But given the fact that Muslims account for less than one per cent of the population and most of them are integrated in the mainstream American society such dire warnings can only be termed as Islamophobia. Gingrich's convincing victory in South Carolina primary makes him a serious contender for the Republican Party nomination for Presidency. In that case his views have to be taken with the consideration they deserve. But the question arises whether any US administration can follow a policy that antagonizes more than a billion Muslims around the world along with a growing number in their midst however disenchanting they may be with their professed religion? Would not such a policy be disruptive of stability that the world needs so badly?

Besides America's main ally is yet to graduate from secular to post-secular age where resurgence of religion wields political influence beyond the boundary that had been set forth since decades. The "rise of the rest" meaning China, Japan, India, Brazil and other emerging economies may not be willing to be on the same page with the US for a tussle of new crusade as such a confrontational international

behavior may adversely affect their own socio-economic advancement. In the ultimate analysis for sustainable international stability the world does not need a hegemon but the removal of the great divide between haves and have-nots in inter and intra communities, both national and international. Focussed poverty alleviation and distributive justice would be more meaningful than army marching through rough and unfriendly terrain.

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