

The history of the Middle East is indelibly linked to the history of Islam as well as to the influence of the Western powers. In the twentieth century, the major Western power that has made its presence felt within the region is the United States. The U.S. has expanded its power in the post war world largely through its tightening grasp upon the world's natural resources—the most significant of these being oil. The U.S. has also made its presence felt within the Middle East through its close relationship with Israel, and the religious implications of such an alliance. Western reactions to the Holocaust combined with the emergence of a strong pro-Israel lobby in American politics have also strongly influenced the United States' policies towards the Middle East. Though initially, Israeli and U.S. relations were tenuous, after their victory in the Six-Day War the U.S. began to adopt a strong pro-Israeli political policy: “The 1967 victory strengthened Israel's diplomatic standing and led to the beginning of a new relationship with the United States,” (Peretz 268).

As the past two hundred years have seen significant changes within the Middle East there have also been alterations to the social order. Lewis writes, “Modernization—or as many saw it, Westernization—widened the gap between rich and the poor. It also made that gap more visible and more palpable.” (Lewis, 384). One of the pressing difficulties, for today, in the Middle Eastern world is that the social order is organized such that the elite social and political leaders exercise an undue amount of power over the masses based upon their levels of education, and their financial capabilities. The situation, in general, is “that the orthodox majority in every country, consisting of religious leaders with traditional education and the uneducated masses who

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blindly follow them, are vehemently opposed to any change in the existing way of thinking or living,” (Husain 98). Many are convinced that the only social changes that are reasonable are those that act to restore society to an imagined gilded age. Consequently, those philosophies and values being spread along with the Western businesses and economies are burdened with the perception that they carry along with them fundamental changes to ways of life.

Doubtlessly, this threat is somewhat reasonable with regards to the future; the expansion of Western economies is going to bring along with it technological changes that will drastically alter how people in the Middle East live their lives. Still, these changes are primarily economic in their nature: capitalism does not reorganize the social classes, only where they live and what jobs they carry out. The philosophical underpinnings of Western society are so similar to those of Islam such that objections to East/West cooperation—on both sides—on the basis of religion are almost ridiculous. Nevertheless, these objections still exist.

Much of world history can be seen, not as a struggle for political or ideological gain, but as a struggle for natural resources. Oil, gas, water, timber, and minerals remain the fundamental reasons why nations often look to expand. This is the core argument put forward by Michael T. Klare in his book *Resource Wars*; and although we are often blinded by religious and political propaganda, what we ultimately fight for is economic stability. In this light, many of the United States’ recent international policies supposedly aimed at the spreading of freedom and stability can more accurately be seen as the United States acting to tighten its grip upon the world’s oil supply. Klare successfully sifts

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through the many conflicts of the modern age in order to fit them into this pattern of resource struggle. Ultimately, he paints a picture of a world that is continually bent upon securing natural resources and that the global depletion of these resources, coupled with the exponential growth in world population, indicates that humanity is on the brink of a conflict of a scale never before seen. Klare presents a coherent and rather compelling case; however, he ignores the possible emergence of alternative resources, which could potentially save mankind from this destructive cycle. Klare's book serves to systematically present a global problem that is more pressing than any political or religious dispute, and through which warfare has become the preferred method by which nations turn their back upon future concerns. The fact is that nearly all of the world's resources are limited in quantity, and that killing each other over them is an immoral and illogical course of action.

This difficulty is emphasized by the apparent contrast between many Middle Eastern governments and those of their Western counterparts. Much of the contrast, according to Lewis, stems from the history of the Islamic state, and the way in which religion itself is at the root of many policies. This has, historically, generated a point of view for Muslims that the non-converted portions of the world merely represent untilled locations to seed faith: "These various infidels, the civilized as well as the barbarous, were seen as teachable, as potential recruits to the Islamic world, and this was indeed the fate of great numbers of them," (Lewis 273). Centuries ago, however, this expansion was much easier because there was no truly cohesive religious force for Islam to contend with

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in the region. Yet today, Islam itself is being assailed by Western technologies, philosophies, and religions.

As the colonial powers took hold in the Middle East, they had the effect of consolidating peoples who were continuing the contentions rooted in the ancient empires' conflicts. With the end of the Second World War and the Cold War, nations in the Middle East increasingly found that the Western powers were less willing to take part in cross-cultural and cross-religious battles: "In the last decade of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that in facing these problems, the governments and peoples of the Middle East were substantially on their own," (Lewis 385). Accordingly, the only recent militaristic impact of the West upon the Middle East has been motivated by consolidation of natural resources. As a result, Lewis sees the future of the Middle East as being dominated less by the imperialistic powers directly, and more by the economic changes that their interests will bring about. In turn, these will lead to more cultural and social changes. Grappling with the associated problems, it would seem will be an almost wholly internal task.

Undoubtedly, the twentieth century has brought about the most drastic and significant changes that most societies in the world have ever seen. As a result, every society has been forced to repeatedly analyze and reformulate its understanding of the relationships between spirituality, religion, society, and the greater good. Islam, far from being the exception to this trend, has actually emerged as the focal point of some of the most significant and volatile social changes in the modern age: "The nineteenth and twentieth centuries proved to be a period of major transformation in the history of Islam:

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a time of humiliation and subjugation, independence and revolution, revival and reform,” (Esposito 644). The Middle East has come to be the modern intersection between Western and Eastern ideals, philosophies, religions, economies, and armies.

From this observation it is possible to characterize the major undercurrents of Middle Eastern Islamic political and social thought that have dominated the modern age. Broadly, it has been a dualistic system since the days of Western imperialism: “Many modern-educated Muslims were and are dissatisfied with the alternatives represented by both the new secular intellectuals and the traditional ulama,” (Esposito and Voll 17). The ulama formed as a social class in Muslim society as the representatives of Muslim traditions and beliefs after the death of Muhammad; yet as time passed, they increasingly became associated with the unjust, impious, and corrupt aspects of society. The ulama were the intellectuals of society at the same time as they were the keepers of the intellectual tradition. However, their power began to decline at the closing of the nineteenth century, and many sought only to preserve chiefly their own social station under the oppressive weight of Western imperialism (Esposito and Voll 16). In effect, “The ulama’s static sanctification of Islam’s classical or medieval formulation and their resistance to change were blamed for the backwardness and plight of the Islamic community,” (Esposito 647). So, in large part, the resistance to the traditional organization of intellectual society and capital came out of resentment or blame for the weakened state of Islam relative to the Christian West. It was at this time that new versions of intellectuals began to emerge in the Islamic world; intellectuals who sought to bring about social change and justice.

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The current liberal economy has been identified as the key player in the modern struggle for resources. Many critics of liberal economies have identified imperialism as a necessary consequence of market forces—powerful nations become able to exert economic and political control over weaker nations by injecting capital into them to draw on potential incomes. Traditional imperialism consists of the outright exploitation of foreign resources and workforces by first exercising military control, but neo-imperialism consists of the exploitation of foreign resources by corporations following the opening of foreign markets. Generally, both have been viewed as the negative consequences of a free market allowed to operate unchecked, and have generated numerous social backlashes: “The frequent observation that globalization is not global, meaning that processes and benefits associated with globalization are uneven throughout the world, is reinforced in this backlash,” (Imade). So, “Why have resources become so important? As suggested earlier, the adoption of an econocentric security policy almost always leads to an increased emphasis on resource protection—at least for those states that depend on raw material imports for their industrial prowess,” (Klare 14). And in the age of economic globalization, this includes every nation with any industrial prowess.

The feature of the world today that implies our future struggles for resources will be more intense than in the past is that, “Growing demand for basic materials in colliding with another key aspect of the global resource equation: the fact that the world supply of some substances is quite limited,” (Klare 18). These dwindling resources include: forest cover, marine fisheries, freshwater systems, and energy (Klare 18). Additionally, “Of the various materials that fall into this sensitive category, the most significant are oil and

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water,” (Klare 19). Clearly, shortages in fish and timber possess the capability to recover if pressures upon these resources are lessened—they are organic and renewable.

Additionally, many mineral resources and sources of concrete for building are nearly infinite for human purposes. The two serious threats to modern civilization remain in a class of their own because they are finite resources, and are already being used near enough to their capacity to raise alarm.

Still, there are still many Islamic intellectual activists that advocate and implement practices that are not as universally admirable as those proposed by the Islamic modernists and their contemporary heirs. Hasan al-Turabi, for one, has come forward in the past few decades in the Sudan as a significant shaping force in the direction of modern Islam, as well as the direction of political policy: “In many ways, he is the prototype, almost the stereotype, of the Muslim activist intellectual,” (Esposito and Voll 149). Turabi’s most basic position has been that the establishment of an Islamic state is necessary to pull Islam into the modern age and make it competitive with the West. He writes, “An Islamic state cannot be isolated from society, because Islam is a comprehensive, integrated way of life,” (Esposito and Voll 137). In other words, Turabi calls for an Islamic state because he feels that it is the only environment in which Islam can truly exist; all other organizations would result in the perversion of Islam’s divine ideals. With this end in mind, Turabi has advocated jihad as one possible means toward attaining his goals; he even helped Osama bin-Laden to relocate his operations to the Sudan when under political pressures from Saudi Arabia.

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So it should be apparent that Islam spans the entire spectrum from reactionary conservative to revolutionary liberal, but that some of the most modern developments have been ones of sociopolitical fusion and synergy. The contrasts between these competing views may be greater in the modern Islamic world than anywhere else on earth. Accordingly, the intellectual developments growing out of Islam should be precisely those developments that Western intellectuals investigate and understand. For over a millennium the Islamic world has been the crossroads between the East and the West—this has never changed—and it may now be the crossroads between the past and the future.

At home, Newhouse summarizes, “Thus far the post-9/11 experience, as Bush shaped it, has skewed America’s perceptions of security, along with its place and role in the world,” (Newhouse 155). Publicly, many people believe that the U. S. truly possesses an obligation to involve itself unilaterally in world diplomacy, solely on the shoulders of our military. Yet, a more objective inspection of the war in Iraq and our military actions since the end of the Second World War suggests something else. In short, the U. S. policy has continued to consist of a search for ways to generate immediate and short term gains at the expense of the rest of the world; essentially, the U. S. continues the pursuit of a neo-imperialist empire to maintain its grip upon the planet’s resources. This is a fundamentally backward approach. The wars the United States has waged, although allowing the nation unprecedented control over natural resources, has additionally accelerated humanity into the troubles that the twenty-first century will see. Only by recognizing these problems can we hope to avoid their consequences; so far, only menial



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measures have been taken by the nations best positioned to answer the call. Immediate measures must be taken, and none of these measures include war.

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