ISLAMISM AND EMPIRE: 
THE INCONGRUOUS NATURE OF 
ISLAMIST ANTI-IMPERIALISM

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An animated debate is under way within the Left, the Right, and among Islamists themselves about the status of current Islamist movements vis-à-vis neoliberal imperialism. Rightist circles are clear that Islamism is a regressive, anti-modern and violent movement that poses the greatest threat to the ‘free world’. Islamism represents, in their view, a ‘totalitarian ideology’, a ‘cousin of fascism and communism’, which stands opposed to modernity and to the enlightenment values enshrined in the capitalist free world. In a sense, the idea of a ‘clash of civilizations’ captures the ‘objective contradictions’ of Islam and Islamism with Western modernity and its universalizing mission.

Leftist groups, however, seem to be divided. While some groups see Islamist movements as ‘analogues to fascism’, so that the best socialists can hope for is to break individuals away from the Islamist ranks and lure them into progressive camps, others consider Islamism as an anti-imperialist force with which the Left can find some common ground. For the British Socialist Workers’ Party, for instance, in the current conditions of mounting Islamophobia in the West, an ‘internationalist duty to stand with Muslims against racism and imperialism’ requires secular socialists to forge alliances with such admittedly conservative organizations as the Muslim Association of Britain, whose misogynous stand on gender issues in Muslim communities is often overlooked on the grounds of cultural ‘relativism’.

Others suggest that ‘Islam has the advantage of being simultaneously an ethno-nationalist identity as well as a resistance movement to subordination to the dictates of capitalist world economy’. Thus, by mobilizing civil society against structural adjustment, by offering alternative welfare systems to the shrinking role of the states in fulfilling its responsibilities, Islamists currently present the most important challenge to global neoliberalism. In-
deed for some observers, the seemingly proletarian profile of Islamists and their populist rhetoric render them the movement of the dispossessed. In this sense, their anti-imperialist stand, combined with religious language, makes the Islamist movement analogous to the Latin American liberation theology of the 1960s and 1970s, which took the liberation of the poor as its central moral objective. Mike Davis’s influential survey, *Planet of Slums*, for instance, portrays militant Islamism (along with Pentecostalism) as a ‘song of the dispossessed’ who survive in the misery of slums, as in Palestine’s Gaza Strip, or Baghdad, defying the empire’s Orwellian technologies of repression by resorting to the ‘gods of chaos’, daily explosions and suicide bombings. Does this imply that Islamism represents the indigenous Middle Eastern version of global dissent against neoliberal imperialism?

The notion of ‘anti-imperialism’ has traditionally held a normative significance, referring to a just struggle waged by often secular progressive forces to liberate subjugated peoples from the diktat of global capitalism and imperial (economic, political and cultural) domination, and to establish self-rule, social justice, and support for the working classes and ‘the subaltern’ – women, minorities, and marginalized groups. Such anti-imperialism has been embraced, for instance, by the current anti-globalization movement to challenge the dictates of the ‘new empire’. This notion of empire is distinct from the liberal concept, where ‘leaders of one society rule directly or indirectly over at least one other society, using instruments different from (though not necessarily more authoritarian than) those used to rule at home’. In the liberal conception, empire is not all that bad; the British empire spread the institutions of parliamentary democracy across the globe, and the US empire, as the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson stresses, not only seeks to ensure US national security and acquire raw materials, but also provides crucial ‘public goods’ such as peace, global order and ‘Americanization’ for the rest of the world through the export of commodities and ideas. In contrast, the left-critical concept of the ‘new empire’ is one which consists, in the words of David Harvey, of a mix of ‘neo-liberal restructurings world-wide and the neoconservative attempt to establish and maintain a coherent moral order in both the global and various national situations’; it results from the need of capital to dispose of its surplus, which involves geographical expansion. Put simply, capital needs the state to clear the way for a secure and less-troubled context for overseas investment.

What is the relationship of the current Islamist movements to neoliberal imperialism? Do they pose a genuine challenge, or are they no more than reactions which offer unfortunate justifications for neoliberal hegemony? I suggest that the fundamental question is not whether Islamists pose resistance
to empire, nor whether they are anti-imperialist or fascist. The relevant question rather is what does Islamist anti-imperialism entail vis-à-vis the mass of Muslim humanity.

WHAT IS ISLAMISM?

Some of the problems involved in exploring the anti-imperialist position of Islamism lie in its multiple facets and meanings. Some observers focus on the political economy of certain Islamist trends, concluding that it stands against neoliberal orthodoxy; some highlight Islamist movements’ welfare operations, focusing on Islamism’s proletarian character; while still others concentrate on Islamism’s ideologies, moral codes and religio-political visions, finding them conservative, regressive, or even fascist.

Not only does Islamism possess different facets; it also refers to different types of organizations, different visions of an Islamic order, and different ways in which to achieve such an order. While gradualist and reformist Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in Algeria, Syria, Sudan, Kuwait, Palestine and Jordan pursue non-violent methods of mobilizing civil society – through work in professional associations, NGOs, local mosques and charities – the militant trends, such as the Jama’a al-Islamiya in Egypt or the Algerian FIS, resort to violence and terrorism against state agencies, Western targets and civilians, hoping to cause a Leninist-type insurrection. And such militant Islamists also differ from current jihadi trends, such as the groups associated with al-Qaeda. Whereas militant Islamism represents political movements operating within the given nation-states and targeting primarily the secular national state, the jihadis are transnational in their ideas and operations, and represent fundamentally apocalyptic ‘ethical movements’ involved in ‘civilizational’ struggles, with the aim of combating a highly abstract ‘West’, and all societies of ‘non-believers’. They invariably resort to extreme violence both against the self (suicide bombing) and their targets.\footnote{11}

Many Islamic-oriented groups are not even Islamist, strictly speaking. A growing trend that I call ‘post-Islamist’ wants to transcend Islamism as an exclusivist and totalizing ideology, espousing instead inclusion, pluralism and ambiguity. In Iran, it took the form of the ‘reform movement’ which partly evolved into the ‘reform government’ of 1997–2004. In addition, a growing number of Islamic groups, such as the current Lebanese Hezbollah, the al-Wasat Party in Egypt, the Turkish Virtue Party and the Justice and Development Party, and the Indian Jama’at Islami, are in the throes of transformation, increasingly exhibiting some aspects of ‘post-Islamism’. Post-Islamist movements aspire for a secular state, but wish to promote religious ethics
in their societies, while their economic positions range from promoting the free-market to some kind of social democracy.\textsuperscript{12}

Global events since the late 1990s (the Balkan ethnic wars, the Russian domination of Chechnya, the Israeli re-occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, not to mention post-9/11 anti-Islamic sentiments in the West) have created among Muslims an acute sense of insecurity and a feeling of siege. This in turn has heightened their sense of religious identity and communal bonds, generating a new trend of ‘active piety’, a sort of missionary tendency quite distinct from the highly-organized and powerful ‘a-political Islam’ of the Tablighi movement (a missionary movement of spiritual awakening active among Muslims) in being quite individualized, diffused, and inclined toward Salafism. Its adherents aim not to establish an Islamic state, but to reclaim and enhance the self, while striving to implant the same mission in others.\textsuperscript{13}

In this essay I take Islamism to refer to the ideologies and movements which, notwithstanding their variations, aim in general at establishing an ‘Islamic order’ – a religious state, Islamic laws, and moral codes. Concerns such as establishing social justice, are only supposed to follow from this strategic objective. Historically speaking, Islamism has been the political language not just of the marginalized but particularly of high-achieving middle classes who saw their dream of social equity and justice betrayed by the failure of both capitalist modernity and socialist utopia. They aspired to an alternative social and political order rooted in ‘indigenous’, Islamic history, values and thought. Segments of the poor may support Islamism when they feel it can increase their life chances. Even though different currents of Islamists have adopted different ways to achieve their ultimate goals, they have all used a religious, Islamic language and conceptual framework, favoured conservative social mores and an exclusive social order, and have had a patriarchal disposition and broadly intolerant attitudes towards different ideas and lifestyles. Theirs, then, has been an ideology and a movement resting on a blend of religiosity and obligation, with little commitment to the language of rights.

AN ANTI-IMPERIALIST MOVEMENT?

What then is the status of such a movement vis-à-vis the new empire? A cursory survey of the discourses and practices of Islamists reasonably foregrounds critical and anti-imperialist tendencies. From their street marches and protests to their welfare programmes in the back streets of the Muslim metropolis; from their defiance of Israel and the US role in the Middle East to their populist anti-globalization rhetoric – everything seems to point to
the implacable opposition of these movements to global domination. What political force has in recent years inflicted more economic, geopolitical, and physical injury to Western powers than militant Islamism?

The victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent seizure of the US Embassy and diplomats in 1979 heralded the advent of a new oppositional force. The revolution threw the major ally of the West, the Shah, out of power, and instigated similar movements that threatened to erode US interests and influence in the Muslim Middle East. The writings of the Sorbonne-educated Ali Shariati, a key anti-imperialist Muslim intellectual, had a significant impact on a generation of revolutionaries who presided over the state power in Iran after the Shah. Shariati brought the modern concepts of ‘class’, ‘class struggle’, ‘revolution’, and ‘classless society’ from Marx into Shiite Islamic discourse, giving a scientific legitimacy to what he termed ‘red’ or ‘revolutionary Shiasm’.\(^{14}\) One of the ‘God-worshiping socialists’ of the late 1960s, and deeply influenced by Frantz Fanon’s and Marx’s social theories, Shariati nevertheless remained critical of the materialist conception of man in Marxism and other Western philosophies.\(^{15}\) Yet for him it was the revolutionary struggle against imperialism, and not simply religious identity, that should guide political alliances. It was a position of this sort that informed the ‘Islamic Marxism’ of Iran’s Mujahideen Khalq organization, a major player in the immediate post-revolutionary situation of 1979.\(^{16}\) Also, influenced by developments in Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah has moved since the late 1980s to center-stage in world radical politics, thanks to its relentless struggle to oust Israeli occupation forces from Lebanon. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, has been an avid reader of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and other anti-colonial figures.

Revolutionary Third-Worldism has not been limited to Shiite militants. The Egyptian Sayid Qutb, a leader of the Society of Muslim Brothers, the oldest and largest Islamist movement in the Arab world, brought the concept of \textit{jahili} state and society from the Indian thinker Abulala’ Mawdudi, who was himself influenced by Lenin’s perspective on organization and the state. Mawdudi’s notion of Islamic ‘theo–democracy’ was not very dissimilar to a kind of communist state in which the capitalist economy was to succumb to the principle of ‘justice’. In his long essay, the \textit{Struggle between Islam and Capitalism}, the militant Sayyid Qutb urged fellow Muslims not to wait for the ‘miracle of Stalin’, communism, but stand up and fight for their own liberation, social justice and dignity.\(^{17}\) The strategy of Al-Banna, the founder of the group, was remarkably similar to Gramsci’s notions of war of manoeuvre and hegemony, even though there is no evidence that he, unlike the contemporary Turkish Islamist Abdelrahman Dilipak, had actually read Gramsci.
More recently, since the 1980s, many Sunni Marxists in Egypt (such as Tariq el-Bishri, Mohammad Emarah, Mustafa Mahmoud, Adel Hussein, Abdul-wahab el-Massiri and others) have been turning to Islamism, bringing many Marxian visions and vocabularies into political Islam and offering Islamism as an indigenous Third-Worldist ideology to fight imperialism, Zionism and, more importantly, secularism.\(^{18}\)

Islamists see their economy and polity, and especially their culture, as having become dominated by ‘Western powers’, and US-led globalization in particular, which subordinates Islam’s core values. Mohammad Mahdi Akif, the current leader of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, regards the US design in the Middle East, its call for ‘democratization’, with great suspicion, because the US has invariably supported the region’s secular dictators and spread its corrupting cultural products throughout the Middle East.\(^{19}\) Even the Muslim Brotherhood’s younger and more moderate leadership (such as Esam el-Eryan) continues to lash out at the US for its building of a ‘global empire’ under the guise of globalization, \(^{20}\) and because it subverts the Muslim Brothers’ objective of establishing an Islamic international entity (kiyan Islami) in the Muslim lands.\(^{21}\) Indeed, the very process of ‘globalization’ is no less than a ‘trap’ to subjugate the down-trodden (mustazafin) of the world, in particular the Islamic umma (community) through modern technology.\(^{22}\)

For Islamists, imperialism is embodied not simply in military conquest and economic control; it manifests itself first and foremost in cultural domination, established through the spread of secular ideas, immorality, foreign languages, logos, names, food and fashion.\(^{23}\)

Thus Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a major theoretician of Iran’s hardliners, formulates the dictates of the kuffar (or non-believers, or the ‘West’) over Muslims in four domains. Military conquest as in the crusades may be uncommon, but it goes with political control, or ruling through cronies and proxy regimes; and economic dominance which creeps in by changing consumer cultures, exploiting material resources and economic dependency. But the most ravaging aspect is cultural command, a sort of soft imperialism established through science, technology, films, entertainment, alien ideas and values which insidiously subvert Islam’s hegemony. What instigates cultural domination is partly the Western fear of annihilation, a kind of Darwinian struggle in which cultures need to dominate if they are not to vanish.\(^{24}\)

The idea of ‘global village’, according to Egyptian Adel Hussein, is nothing other than world rule by a single village head, the US; in other words, the Americanization of the planet. Precisely because Islam believes in human diversity, it inevitably challenges the homogenizing tendency of US-led globalization.\(^{25}\)
Clearly then the objective contradiction between Islamism and imperialism is real. The politics and value-system preached and practised by Islamists would allow little of the kind of ‘freedom’ that the current neoliberal hegemons so deeply cherish. The puritanical and largely exclusivist image of social order projected by Islamists conflicts with the free flow of cultural goods and ideas that globalization unleashes. Islamists lash out at what they see as the homogenizing onslaught of globalization against cultural diversity; and yet they strive to enforce homogeneous thought and life-styles in the societies they rule. They defend, as do most democrats, the right of Muslim women in Europe to wear what they wish; and yet many of them deny such rights to both Muslim and non-Muslim women in their societies. Islamists offer a doctrinal justification for this by arguing that Islam does not accept Muslims being subjected to the dominion of ‘non-believers’. However, the notion of ‘non-believers’ is often interpreted so broadly that it would potentially include any non-Muslim Westerner, even those who may express solidarity with ‘Muslim cause’. In short, key to the anti-imperialist disposition of Islamism is the clash over hegemony. Islamists’ desire to cultivate an exclusive morality and culture to facilitate their authority over the Muslim umma is subverted by the spread of Western cultural and discursive practices. These observations give some idea of the incongruous nature of Islamist anti-imperialism.

AUTHORITARIAN ANTI-IMPERIALISTS

It is certainly reductionist to attribute the rise of Islamism to Cold War politics – to US support for Islamists in order to undermine communism. Islamist resurgence has crucial internal roots. Yet the fact remains that Islamists and the ‘free world’ have at certain junctures made tacit alliances against anti-imperialist secular movements in the Middle East. The US went along quite easily with Saudi Arabia’s attempt to promote Wahhabism as an ideological bulwark against the sweeping secular nationalism and republicanism that the Nasserist revolution unleashed in 1960s. In the same decade and in the early 1970s, Islamists were deployed against the revolutionary movements (as in Oman) as well as against secular leftists, communists, and women’s movements. It has now become an open secret how the US and UK allied with the Islamist Mujahideen in Afghanistan to combat the USSR, and especially how the US-backed government of Pakistan sheltered the Taliban in their formative years. In other words, imperialism has in certain periods benefited from groups of Islamist militants. These conjunctural convergences should not, however, conceal the deep enmity between the two forces, as outlined earlier. The key question is: what is there in this for
the mass of Muslim subaltern and other social forces who also fight the new empire? Certainly Islamists’ struggles undercut certain material and strategic interests of the West. But do they necessarily undermine its global ideological hegemony? Islamists’ struggles may contribute to liberating Muslim nations from foreign domination. But do they herald liberty, democracy and well-being at home?

Islamists in Iran sided with a popular revolution (in 1979) that overthrew the autocratic regime of the Shah, backed by Western powers, seriously undermining foreign influence in the country. But once in power the ruling elites established a religious authoritarian state, an exclusive social order, and a strict moral discipline that have subjugated a large segment of the population. They systematically suppressed rival ‘anti-imperialist forces’—the socialists, secular women’s groups, independent labour organizations and student activism—violating many civil liberties and establishing draconian social control. Indeed, the labelling of any cultural practice disapproved by the Islamist authorities as a Western ‘cultural invasion’ (in the formulation of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi) has meant severe repression and the systematic disciplining of both youth and women, in particular.²⁸

It is true that factional struggles within the Islamist regime between ‘in-house’ rivals have at times opened some breathing-space for dissent from below. Yet Islamist factions have invariably forged an alliance at the top when opposition from below has mounted; they have opposed inclusive democracy, pluralist ideas, and independent voices. It was only with the ascendancy to power of reformists led by President Muhammad Khatami (1997–2004) that a new hope unfolded for democratic governance. However with the reformists’ defeat, by 2004, through electoral fraud, massive disqualification of their candidates, and popular dissatisfaction with their economic failures, Ahmadinejad’s government brought a new round of repression. Since 2005 scores of independent NGOs have been closed down; key activists incarcerated; intellectuals and journalists detained; dissenting faculty and students removed, women activists put behind bars, and mass protests of teachers and bus drivers put down. Ahmadinejad’s populist electoral campaign focused on fighting corruption, generating jobs, and a generous distribution of oil money. Yet under his presidency the number of Iranians below the poverty line has increased by 13 per cent.²⁹ His cabinet—closely linked to the military, intelligence, and security apparatuses—has been building a support base in the network of clients among segments of the provincial poor, but also among military veterans, and those benefiting from connections to the state—administrators of the Revolutionary Guards, informal credit associations, and the like.³⁰ However justified it is to oppose Israel’s continuing
subjugation of the Palestinian people, Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israel rhetoric is another matter when it extends to a denial of the holocaust, making him a bedfellow with the most grotesque white-supremacists such as David Duke, a former leader of KKK.\textsuperscript{31} The hardliners’ demagogic rhetoric on Iran’s right to develop nuclear technology may inspire anti-American sentiments in the Middle East. But it can also play into the hands of intransigent war-mongers in Washington and Tel Aviv, with potentially catastrophic consequences.\textsuperscript{32}

The contradictory and self-serving nature of Islamist anti-imperialism is not limited to Iran. Egypt’s Jama’a al-Islamiya not only moralized its constituency and imposed discipline on its followers’ behaviour, but also terrorized unveiled women and non-Muslims, and murdered scores of Christian Copts and foreign tourists, while it fought fiercely against the US-backed regime of President Mubarak. Al-Qaeda’s elitism, misogyny, and widespread violence against its critics, secularists, and Shiite Muslims are too well-known to require elaboration here. Even the ‘anti-imperialism’ of the Arab Mujahideen who in the early 1990s rushed to ‘help’ the Bosnian Muslims against the Serbian aggression meant, in the end, little to the victims. These Islamist internationals had their own Islamization agenda – one that the Bosnian Muslims resented. Instead of focusing on humanitarian objectives they concentrated on military operations and missionary work – spreading Salafi ideas through print, TV channels and websites. They challenged the local religious authorities and attempted to turn Bosnia into a base against the West, and the Bosnian conflict into a war between Islam and Christianity.\textsuperscript{33} No wonder these kinds of activities created among Europeans a fear of radical ‘white Muslims’ in the heart of Europe, thus jeopardizing the legitimacy of the otherwise just Bosnian cause. Of course, such self-serving anti-imperialism is not restricted to religious, or for that matter Islamist, experience; one has only to note the sad destiny of the champion of secular socialist anti-imperialism, the Zimbabwean Robert Mugabe, who ended up leading a nation that has to endure 20-hour daily electric cuts, triple digit inflation, and a massive demolition of poor people’s homes.\textsuperscript{34}

So the fundamental question is not whether Islamism challenges imperialist interests, which it does. The question rather is to what extent this struggle entails an emancipation of the subaltern in Muslim societies. And this point lies at the heart of the difference between Middle Eastern Islamism and Latin American liberation theology, notwithstanding their shared religious languages and anti-imperialist positions.
A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION?

While Islamist movements (notwithstanding their variations) have in general aimed at the establishment of an Islamic order (a religious state with Sharia law and moral codes), from which social justice and improving the life of the poor are to trickle down, for liberation theology the point of departure has been the 'liberation of the poor'; the Gospel is re-read and reinterpreted to achieve this fundamental goal. The principal question for liberation theology was 'how can we be Christians in the world of misery?' ‘We can be Christians, authentic Christians, only by living our faith in a liberating way’, they replied.35

Originally liberation theology was a reaction to, and a reflection of, the hideous imperial legacy of the Church in Latin America. For in contrast to the Islamic ulema (scholars) who were mostly involved in anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East, the Latin American Catholic Church was an instrument of Iberian colonialism, which was to bring riches to Spain and Portugal and to Christianize the colonies. Not only did the Church support colonial rule, it continued to back the wealthy conservative classes in society after independence was achieved. Even some rethinking during the 1930s, reflected in the ‘New Christendom’ and the subsequent emergence of Christian Democratic Parties, failed to overturn the Church’s old conservative disposition. Yet dramatic social and political events (poverty and oppression, military coups, American support of the holders of power and property, the failure of the Christian Democratic Parties, the sudden victory of the Cuban Revolution and the wave of popular guerrilla movements) had pushed the Church to the brink of social irrelevance. There was a need to intervene to save Catholicism from the conservatism of the Church’s elites.36

Thus unlike Islamism, liberation theology was not so much an expression of cultural identity in the sense of self-preservation vis-à-vis a dominating Western ‘other’; it was imbedded in the indigenous discourse of development, underdevelopment, and dependency that Latin America was fiercely debating at the time. Indeed, the idiom of a ‘theology of liberation’ emerged in the context of clerics exploring a ‘theology of development’. It was Gustavo Gutierrez who, during the Conference of the World Council of Churches held in Switzerland in 1969, replaced that term with the ‘theology of liberation’, popularizing the concept through his book, Liberation Theology. Central to this notion was, of course, the emancipation of the subaltern.37

In contrast, Islamism had a different birth and birthplace. Broadly speaking, Islamism arose as a language of self-assertion to mobilize those (largely
middle class high-achievers supported often pragmatically by segments of the lower classes) who felt marginalized by the dominant economic, political, or cultural processes, those for whom the failure of both capitalist modernity and socialist utopia made the language of morality (religion) a substitute for politics. In a sense, it was the Muslim middle-class way of saying ‘No’ to those whom they considered their ‘excluders’ – their national elites, secular governments, and these governments’ Western allies. So they rejected Western cultural domination, its political rationale, moral sensibilities and cultural symbols, even if in practice many of them shared those traits, as in their neckties, food, and technologies. As an alternative to existing models they attempted to offer an alternative utopian society and state for Muslim humanity. It was also a project that aimed to regain the self-respect of Muslims relative to Western cultural imperialism and to Zionism as a perceived component of this. And all these aspirations arose in the context of the Cold War, when the US’s fear of communism and secular nationalism drew it close to Islamist movements.38

While Islamists aim to Islamize their society, polity and economy, liberation theologians never intended to Christianize their society or states, but rather to change society from the vantage point of the deprived. Liberation theology, then, had much in common with humanist, democratic, and popular movements in Latin America, including labour unions, peasant leagues, student groups and guerrilla movements, with whom it organized campaigns, strikes, demonstrations, land occupations and development work. Here, as a partner of a broad popular movement, liberation theology aimed not to proselytize, nor to make the coalition partners Christian, but to help advance the cause of the liberation movement in general. More important, liberation theology shared a great deal with humanist Marxism. Indeed, both Latin American Marxism and liberation theology had been influenced by the language of the radical dependencia of the 1960s and 1970s that originated primarily in the South American continent. Prominent priests such as the Boff brothers (of Brazil), Gutierrez (of Peru), Bonino (of Venezuela) and Torres (of Columbia) were intellectual theologians equipped with the discourse of dependency and Marxist humanism.

A reinterpretation of Christian theology was to facilitate the goal of emancipation. They began first with the practice of liberation, and then their theology was formed as a reflection of that praxis. ‘There is no truth outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which men are involved as agents’, argued Bonino.39 The protagonists refrained from projecting a blueprint for the future. What they could present was a general direction and basic structures, or ‘historical projects’ – something half-way to ‘utopia’. This ‘human
project’ sought to transcend capitalism and to imagine a form of democratic socialism. It would be carried out by ordinary people, the grassroots. Such an imagined society was to be informed by the spirit of participation and cooperation. People were to move beyond struggles for equality and justice to a society in which they would achieve true social solidarity, organized around the concept of love.

In contrast, few Islamic activists self-consciously incorporated Marxist notions into their ideologies. As noted earlier, the Iranian Ali Sahriati and his followers, the Islamic Mujahideen Khalq Organization, had been influenced by Marx’s economic analyses and his critique of capitalism. They adopted such concepts as ‘class struggle’, ‘exploitation’, and ‘classless society’, and mixed them with Third-Worldist language drawn from Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and other anti-colonial leaders. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, even this small Marxist influence had gone among Islamist intellectuals, as they moved toward nativist ideas and their ‘authentic’ canons expressed in the Qur’an, Sunna, and the classic Islamic fatawi and treatises. ‘Return to the self’, or discursive self-reliance, was a key ideological feature of the new Islamism. Thus, while most liberation theologians in Latin America embraced Marxist notions of liberation, many Marxists in the Muslim Middle East (e.g. Adel Hussein, Mustafa Mahmoud, El-Messiri, Behzad Nabavi and Mohammad Emara) abandoned their previous ideology and turned to Islam as an indigenous model for social transformation.

As a consequence, building an exclusive moral and ideological community was substituted for the social emancipation of the subaltern. Da’wa, an invitation to Islam, became a key objective for Islamists. Even though Islamists varied in their economic visions – ranging from distributive populism through the mixed-economy to the Friedmanite free market – they generally converged on the idea of a closed social order, a polity based upon Sharia, and adherence to cultural nativism. Although gradualist Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, the Rifah Party in Turkey, and the pre-election FIS in Algeria, formed political parties and were active in professional associations, communities, educational institutions and parliament, they remained overwhelmingly politicist in approach and middle-class in profile. Radical Islamists – the Mujahideen of Iran, those in Algeria after the 1992 cancellation of elections, Egyptian militants, and Persian Gulf Islamist groups – opted for a vanguardist project of seizing state power through armed struggle. A few attempts by such Muslim intellectuals as the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi or the Indian Asghar Ali Engineer to build the intellectual basis for an Islamic liberation theology lost out to the populist
fundamentalism of the growing Islamist trend. Elitism remained a key feature of Islamist politics.

CONCLUSION:
ANTI-IMPERIALISM OR EMANCIPATION?

What then of the anti-imperialism of Islamist movements? At one level Islamism has shown a formidable opposition to the new empire, contributing to undercutting certain strategic interests of the Western powers, and especially the US. Islamists have spearheaded protracted public protests against US policies in the Middle East, especially its support for Israel. They have also opposed the region’s secular authoritarian regimes, and diminished or disrupted the normalization of US control in the region, particularly in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

But has Islamism been able to offer, either in practice or in theory, a viable alternative to imperialist domination? Despite its practical failures, socialism managed, albeit only for some time, to articulate a powerful theoretical model of social justice and liberation of the oppressed that offered a solid alternative to capitalist hegemony. For a while, it undermined the ideological foundation of bourgeois values and the capitalist economic model. Things however have been different with Islamism. The largely culturalist thrust of Islamists’ anti-imperialism has meant that they have little to offer in the domain of political economy. Even their ‘distributive populism’ remains largely a feature of their movement phase; the economic policies (even though they vary across different countries and time periods) of the Islamist states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan or Afghanistan, differ little from those of other non-ideological developing economies with comparable national incomes.

On the other hand, a preoccupation with particularistic cultural and religious struggles has allowed little room to work with global movements which pursue broader concerns such as the environment, livelihoods, and welfare systems. This culturalism, instead of forging alliances, has caused division and hostility at both national and international levels. Although a populist posture, affordable welfare provisions, moral language, and fierce opposition to corrupt Middle East regimes has earned Islamist movements support, they have failed to set up a viable alternative because of their patriarchal, exclusionist, authoritarian vision of social order and lack of a solid economic vision. If anything, Islamism, especially its radical version, has played into the hands of imperialist circles; its policies have in practice justified and dignified the position of its neoliberal enemies who preach individual liberty and open social order. The undemocratic precepts and practices of most Islamist groups have provoked widespread anti-Islamic reactions, security measures, illiberal poli-
cies, and global surveillance, which taken together have victimized ordinary Muslims in the West and in the Muslim world alike.

The 1980 Iran hostage-taking was bold, and a blow to the US sense of self-importance; but it led to surveillance at home and hostility abroad. On the same day that the Muslim militants climbed over the embassy walls, a large group of unemployed marched in the streets of Tehran to demand jobs and social protection. But the desperate appeals of those marchers were stifled by the nationalist outcry of the militants who were preoccupied with ‘Islam against the Great Satan’. The hostage-taking also pushed the US to support a devastating Iran-Iraq war which cost millions of lives and massive economic destruction. Only recently have some critics openly wondered who benefited from this hostage-taking – the umma, or imperialism? And now once again after more than 25 years history seems to be repeating itself, this time with a more tragic prospect. President Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric over the holocaust and his populist language has already played into the hands of the most dangerous war-mongers in Washington and Tel Aviv, who are fantasizing about massive air strikes against the Islamic Republic.

The good news is that Islamist movements can and do modify their positions under the test of time, by adhering to a certain democratic ethos, pluralist principles, and broader inclusive objectives. Some clear signs of change can be observed, for instance, in the organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan in recent years, in Hezbollah of Lebanon, and especially among the 1980s generation of Iranian Islamists who by the late 1990s had turned ‘post-Islamist’ in theory and practice. The anti-imperialism of the latter would have different, more meaningful, implications for the Muslim subaltern than that of the Islamist global jihad, for instance.

Far from demagogy and voluntarism, a meaningful anti-imperialism is about building a hegemony that rests on the universal ideals of justice, inclusion, and human dignity. This requires clarity, candour and, more than anything else, a sense of self-confidence. It is about winning the hearts and minds of global humanity to resist the diktat of the new empire in a patient, painstaking, and scrupulous strategy. This means opening up, connecting, negotiating, developing a global platform with and for those in the globe (from various races, religions and gender) who struggle for liberation – not simply liberation from foreign, imperialist, domination, but also liberation from political, patriarchal, economic and religious domination at home. This means transcending nativism, exclusivism, authoritarianism and xenophobia.

Any struggle, however heroic, that replaces imperialist supremacy with domestic forms of oppression will not serve the interests of the Muslim
majority. For decades in the Middle East, the majority of people and liberatory ideas have already been caught in the crossfire between nationalism and colonialism, Baathism and imperialism, and now Islamism and neoliberal empire, from which they are attempting to exit. Thus, the central question for progressive forces is not just how to challenge the empire, but how to realize liberation; for the ultimate end is not simply anti-imperialism, but emancipation.

NOTES


13 This section draws on Asef Bayat, ‘Is There a Future for Islamic Movements?’.


18 Indeed as early as 1954, Bernard Lewis wrote an essay in which he implied how the ethics of Islam was compatible with the spirit of communism. See Lewis, ‘Communism and Islam’, *International Affairs*, 30(1), January 1954.


21 Ibid.


24 Ibid.


26 See Mesbah Yazdi, *Tahajon-e Farhagui*, Tehran, 1997. This volume is translated into Arabic as *Al-Ghazw al-Thiqafi*.


32 For the message of such war mongers see Norman Podhoretz, ‘The Case for Bombing Iran’, *Commentary*, June 2007.


36 In this sense, liberation theologians were similar not to Islamists but to post-Islamist intellectuals and socially conscious Iranian clerics whose mission was to save Islam as a tolerant religion from the authoritarian practices of fundamentalist Islamism. An undemocratic polity lay at the heart of Islamism, ‘republican theology’ became the central thrust in post-Islamist religious discourse; see Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*.


38 For elaboration see Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*.


41 Yet the modernist Islamist intellectuals do receive input from outside Islam. Sheikh Fadlullah of Lebanon reads Fanon; Turkish Abdurrahman Dilipak offers a dialogue with Antonio Gramsci.
