

The Travails of Modern Islam

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<http://www.danielpipes.org/8995/travails-of-modern-islam>

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

It occurred to me that I should try and fit what I know into the mission of this organisation, so I will try something new. It will be a certain level of abstraction and I invite you in the Q&A to become far more specific.

I am a historian of the Muslim world and, in addition to the day-to-day issues that come up, I look at this civilisational unit as a whole. That's what I'll do now.

To start with, the Islamic religion prevails in majority-Muslim countries stretching from Senegal to Indonesia, and is not simply a Middle Eastern phenomenon. Muslim people can now be found in substantial numbers in Europe, North America, Latin America, and indeed, Oceania.

The Islamic religion is also a civilisation. One scholar gave it the name Islamicate, suggesting it can be seen along the same lines as the Italianate. I find this a useful concept. Islamicate civilisation includes non-Muslims who live in majority Muslim countries and who share certain attributes. For example, art can be called Islamicate. You can usually tell which is Muslim art; it's not exactly Islamic as it's not connected to the religion.

I spent the first part of my career trying to understand the nature of the connection between Islam and other aspects of life. In particular I took a topic that's a little bit exotic for the dissertation and my first book, titled *Slave Soldiers and Islam*. I examined a form of military organisation which is unique to the Muslim world and asked how can this phenomenon be connected to the religion of Islam, how can slaves be used as soldiers within these organisations? Of course, slaves were used as soldiers in emergency capacities in various places at various times, but the Muslim use of slaves as soldiers between roughly the years 800 and 1800 was not occasional and not only during emergencies. It was a centralised, very significant institution called the Mamluk Institution, or the Janissary Institution, and could be found over the centuries in different continents.

What possible connection could there be with what is happening today? To make a long story short, my thesis was that Islam demands of Muslims are so onerous to fulfil that for various reasons the Muslim populations withdrew from political life. As a result of this, the rulers needed to reach out to non-Muslims and the best way to do that was through this exotic form of slavery. That insight was one step towards the larger question of how Islam influences politics.

In the broad sweep of history, the Islamic religion got off to a very fast and successful start. Muhammad himself fled Mecca in 622 A.D. By the time of his death, however, he was ruler of Arabia and within 100 years his followers had gone from Spain to India. This was more than just a military conquest. The Muslim faith was successful in culture, the arts, and the economy and created the great empires of its age. Had you looked around the world say precisely a millennium ago, August 20th, 1010, you would've concluded that Islam was the most successful civilisation, more so than those of China, Europe or India.

Starting from about 1200, especially after the Mogul invasions, the civilisation of Islam declined and stagnated for a long time. The striking fact was that Muslims long were generally unaware of this downturn although it finally became vividly obvious around 1800, especially when Napoleon landed in Egypt and wiped out the Ottoman and Mamluk armies. Napoleon brought with him a cadre of scientists who started studying

the flora, fauna, and archaeology, savants who would eventually crack the code of Egyptian hieroglyphics. His was not only a military expedition but a scientific one as well. The contrast between the Egyptians and the French was stark and shocked Muslims into realising that, during their long period of stagnation, Europe had surged ahead.

Trauma followed. Muslims had assumed that they were blessed by God in both spiritual and mundane ways. Now they worried that God had forsaken them, which led to a profound reassessment of what it means to be a Muslim. Muslims saw themselves challenged by Europe and more broadly by the West, and this is a challenge that Muslims still face today. How is it that the people who should be on top – militarily, economically, politically, culturally, scientifically, technologically – how is it that they now sit at the bottom in terms of literacy, longevity, Nobel Prizes per capita, Olympic medals per capita? Indeed, whatever index you choose, Muslim states are at the bottom. Muslim people are not doing well; some of the worst countries in the world include Somalia, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq, all of which are majority Muslim. This is a great strain, a great challenge: What went wrong and how do they fix it? Indeed, Bernard Lewis wrote a book titled *What Went Wrong?*

How do Muslims explain all this?

Over the course of the past 200 years, there have been three major explanations. The first one was what one might call the liberal Western explanation, namely emulating the French and the British. These nationalities descended upon Muslim lands in particular; they built empires; they offered themselves as models. They were extremely successful and Muslims tended to emulate them. The symbolic figure of this trend was Kemal Atatürk, the ruler of Turkey between 1923 and 1938, who removed Islam from public life, replaced Arabic words with French words, brought in Belgian and Swiss legal codes, and in all made Turkey look increasingly Western.

But this didn't work. By the 1920s and 30s, despite Atatürk, there was a sense that this liberal effort had failed. So Muslim adopted another approach. The approach that appeared at that time to be most impressive was the illiberal Western approach. The 1920s were the hey-day of totalitarian societies, with Mussolini and Lenin in particular showing the way. These offered models that proved very influential; Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt symbolizes this approach to politics. For the next 50 to 60 years, the Fascist and Communist models prevailed in large swaths of intellectual and political life. They didn't do too well either, they didn't solve the problems of weakness and poverty.

So, with the disappointment in these two movements came a third solution, namely the Islamist one. The goal of this movement was not to emulate one form or another of Western ideology or power; it was to return to Islamic experience and to draw on the wisdom and achievements of Muslims in the past and to rehabilitate the Muslim world by learning from Islamic experience. The goal is to do something that is old, that draws on Islamic successes of past centuries. Ayatollah Khomeini symbolizes this approach.

Of course, you can't go back. You can emulate 7th-century Islam but you can't repeat it. Islamist movements of recent decades have created a new ideology, not revived something old. I am convinced this will be a failure too. The so far number-one experiment, the Islamic Republic of Iran, has failed by any standard, if only because a great majority of its subjects are rejecting it.

Bin Laden and Wahhabi-style Islamism clearly have no future. How can they run countries? Just imagine Bin Laden as ruler; it would be like the Taliban and it wouldn't work. Even a less extreme version, such as that in Iran, is not workable in the long term. Instead, what we're seeing is that the Islamists are evolving into something that is more sustainable. Turkey offers the outstanding model here. The Turkish Islamists run and win elections; they don't depend on violence. They exercise good economic stewardship and good governance more broadly. While Turkey has many problems, its Islamists have shown that an alternative exists. An era has begun in which Islamists in part use violence on the Bin Laden and in part they work the political system.

Many Islamist groups are making a name for themselves by engaging in social services. One of the tensions now in Pakistan is that the Islamists, as happened with the earthquakes some months ago, are coming in first with the most aid for the victims of flooding. They win good will and respect for their work.

Getting back to the central issue, how Muslims answer the question "What went wrong?" Are they approaching a functional answer? I think not but that we are in a very dark period of little creativity, much instability, and much violence. I don't see any improvements soon but I do anticipate the potential for improvement. Anything that can get worse can, logically, also get better, and I expect a working out of the Islamist impulse, to be followed by something more constructive. At some point, Muslims will begin to discard it and to look elsewhere. I don't know what they're going to look for. Will it be return to the 19th century and Western liberalism? Will it be following the Chinese model?

In the meantime, things could get worse. Chemical, biological and nuclear weapons are within grasp and could be used. This threat could lead to far greater instability. There is also considerable anger within the Muslim world as the great majority of Islamist victims have been Muslim, for example in Algeria and Darfur.

Certainly 9/11 was a major event in which some 3000 non-Muslims were killed. Other events like Bali and Madrid were about 200 people. But these are not large numbers by, say, the standards of the two world wars. So far the West has shrugged off Islamism and not seen it as a truly significant threat. That could change. There could be a far stronger reaction. We are at a point of flux. We will see anarchy in the countries that I named, starting with Somalia (which has experienced 20 years of anarchy). There will also be desperation, extremism, violence, brutality and misogyny.

One implication of this is that Muslims will want to leave their homelands. Where do they go? They don't go to other Muslim countries though there are exceptions. (Afghans go to Iran in huge numbers.) But by and large, they don't want to go to Turkey or Egypt or Indonesia. They want to go to the West for its economic well-being, freedom and security. As you in Australia know, with your substantial number of Lebanese, Somali, Afghan, Iraqi and other refugees, distance is not much of a deterrent.

The number of refugees is likely to grow. The challenge of mixing Islam and the West is already a major topic in much of Europe although not so much here in Australia or in the United States. And this is happening at a time when European birth rates are falling. Europeans are having two thirds of the children they need to sustain their numbers. There is an expectation that immigrants will cover the shortfall. In addition, the Christian religion in Europe is declining as is the sense of cultural confidence. At the same time, Muslim immigrants have plenty of children, religion and cultural confidence.

The West has never experienced such a challenge. I expect Europe will go in one of two rather unpleasant directions. One is to continue the trends of the last 50 years with more Muslims, more Islamic law and more tension, until it transits to becoming an Islamic society. The other is that Europeans at a certain point say – "No, we don't like this. We're going to stop it. We're going to use whatever means are necessary to stop it. We're going to throw people out; we might even kill them." It is too early to predict which trend will prevail.

The Muslim world, to sum up, is burdened by a sense of glory of its past success and power. It feels acutely the trauma of modernity. It's looking for excuses. At this moment, Islamism is the favourite solution but I see it as temporary. This population of over a billion people is in general stress and turmoil. I expect things will get worse before they get better. But they will eventually get better.

On that optimistic note, I conclude.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

QUESTION: You seem to intimate that the AKP (the Turkish Justice and Development Party) is the model.

But aren't they becoming more and more anti-democratic? They're trying to take over the army. The free press that Turkey had is less free now after eight or so years. It would seem that the AKP can only go in one direction. It's going to become more and more authoritarian and totalitarian. Would you agree with that?

DR DANIEL PIPES: I agree with the facts that you've presented and I could present more evidence along those same lines. As the AKP has felt stronger, particularly vis-à-vis the military, it has stopped being so tentative and careful and has taken these sort of steps. Should it vanquish the military, should it do well in the next election which occurs by July 2011, I expect more squeezing, more pressure.

I agree with you, but I don't see why you conclude that this renders the AKP not a model. It looks like a pretty good model to me. It took power by being electorally attractive and then it changes the system. This is very different from Khomeini. I accept your facts but come to a different conclusion.

QUESTION: The less liberal you become the closer you get to the Iranian position. So alright, it won't happen suddenly with an ayatollah landing at the airport as happened in Iran. It'll just take 30 years rather than an instant landing; that's all I'm saying. Am I off the track there?

DR DANIEL PIPES: No, we're not disagreeing. There are two ways for Islamists to attain power, through violence or through the system. Working through the system is a brilliant evolution away from violence. Islamists were in the past dependent on violence. Khomeini got to power and then wanted to spread revolution, he didn't think about developing political parties. But Hezbollah, for example, which began as a Khomeini artefact in the early 1980's has become a political party of great influence in Lebanon. This is a more supple and flexible kind of approach to taking power than was the case earlier.

QUESTION: To follow the Turkish discussion, what will be the chance of them getting into Europe and can you try and explain why the British government is now favouring their entry to Europe?

DR DANIEL PIPES: The chances of Turkish accession to the European Union are very small. Nobody wants it – the Europeans don't want it and the Turks don't want it. Some leaders are trying to push it through. As for David Cameron, I have the sense that he may be not only the leader of the government, but it seems that Nick Clegg is really running the show.

QUESTION: Dr Pipes, perhaps starting from Gallipoli onwards, there's been a very emotional, special relationship between Australia and Turkey, with a very high regard on both sides. How would you see Australia being able to capitalise on that to influence events in modern Turkey?

DR DANIEL PIPES: The goal of the AKP is not to be a bridge between the West and the Muslim world. It is to be a leader of the Middle East. The foreign minister is a strategist who came up with a notion called Strategic Depth. I don't see where Australia fits into that, despite a century of history.

QUESTION: In relation to the two questions of what went wrong and how do we fix it, do you see a difference between hardcore Islamists and those that are less committed?

DR DANIEL PIPES: They are roughly the same. Various versions of Islamism exist. For example, in Saudi Arabia women can't drive, can't do this, can't do that. In Iran, they can. The Iranian idea is that they've created an Islamic republic where women are safe. In the Saudi vision, danger lurks in every corner and females need to be protected. There are many such differences in both style and substance. But in the end, all Islamists aspire to the same thing which is the application of Islamic law. Islamic law differs slightly in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India. They have different schools, but these are again details and in general the aspiration to apply Islamic law is common to all Muslims.

QUESTION: How significant do you think is the link between Turkey and Israel, especially after the Israeli boarding of the Turkish aid boat?

DR DANIEL PIPES: The Turkish government has used anti-Zionism primarily as a vehicle for isolating and discrediting the military. The military is its priority target, for it stands between the AKP and complete sovereignty. The military could at any moment push the Islamists aside, as it did as recently as 1997. But the military now feels weak. It reads the polls and follows elections like everyone else and it doesn't have the confidence to take over. The AKP has accused the military and others of engaging in anti-government activities and is arresting former military officers and wresting control of senior appointments.

QUESTION: Two things jumped out at me. The first related to the successful economic situation experienced by the West, at least until the event of the Global Financial Crisis. The second related to the effective use of technology. What impact did all this have on Islam and how are they likely to evolve?

DR DANIEL PIPES: The Muslim world in general is performing poorly in economic terms. Malaysia and Turkey would be the two exceptions. The great feature of the Muslim world is resources, not too different, in fact, from Western Australia. You don't so much make things as you export commodities. But Western Australia is just a small part of the West. There are almost no inventions from within the Muslim world. Which Egyptian company has an R&D department? Where's the entrepreneurship? It's just not there. There's little creativity. When there is, people go West. There are plenty of very talented Muslims but they don't have the opportunity to develop within their own countries. They go somewhere else – for medicine, computers, whatever it might be. The discovery recently of one trillion U.S. dollars worth of minerals in Afghanistan confirms the trend. Westerners find things and extract them. I see the Muslim world locked into this scenario for a long time to come; it's a little comparable to how the Soviet Union was spying forever on the West and getting its technology, information and insights from it.

This kind of dependence is hard to break. It requires cultural confidence. I've done some work comparing Japan and Turkey. I chose the two countries because Japan had the Meiji Revolution and Turkey had the Atatürk Revolution. Both leaderships not only modernized but Westernized. In Japan, the emperor insisted on ballroom dancing as a facet of Westernising. Likewise, Atatürk banned the turban. But a closer look at this comparison finds that Japanese had an inner confidence that manifested itself in a cultural ease. You can learn, adapt, and remain Japanese. Women, for example, can wear Japanese clothing for formal occasions and Western clothing for casual occasions and it doesn't mean a thing. It's impossible to imagine a Turk donning a traditional outfit without that being a huge cultural and religious statement. Women who wear burqas do not do this on a part-time basis; it's a major cultural assertion. The Japanese can play with cultural differences but not the Turks. The Japanese eat French food one day and on the next eat Japanese – again, it doesn't mean a thing. If you're Egyptian or Turk, however, you eat a certain kind of food and that says who you are. There's this fear among Muslims that they'll lose what it is to be a Muslim. They hold on in a way that the Japanese do not.

QUESTION: You mentioned earlier that the world population of Muslims was well over a billion people. Are you suggesting that all Muslims are Islamists and have hegemonic ambitions vis-à-vis the West?

DR DANIEL PIPES: No, I'm not suggesting that. Somewhere between 10% and 15% of Muslims, roughly an eighth of the Muslim population, seeks the total application of Islamic Law.

QUESTION: Do you believe Islamic and European communities will rise, especially given the migration of large numbers of Muslim people to Europe? Or will this lead to conflict?

DR DANIEL PIPES: There used to be a clear divide between Muslim countries and the West. Until 1955 there were no significant Muslim populations in the West with the exception of some indigenous populations in places like Albania, Yugoslavia and Russia, but certainly not in Western Europe, not here and not in the Americas. Indeed in 1965 there were about 150,000 Muslims in the United States from a population of about 150 million. Now it's more like three million out of a population of 300 million. In France Muslims are thought to be between 5% and 10% of the population. So there is a new-found presence of Muslims in the West.

Simultaneously, Christians in the Muslim world are disappearing. In Iraq, for example, attacks on Christians, especially since 2003, have led to a massive exodus. The same has happened in Bethlehem and Nazareth, which have for centuries had Christian majorities, but no longer.

Malaysia presents an interesting case. Things there appear to be in flux and the role of non-Muslims in Malaysia is still open to question. One can easily imagine that the Islamic movement is trying to push non-Muslims out or convert them. Middle Eastern Christian and Jewish communities that have been in place for 1400 years are disappearing. There are virtually no Jews left in Egypt and the Christian population is extremely stressed, especially in the last 30 years, and is leaving. So, simultaneously, the expansion of Islam in the West and the reduction of the West in Islam are taking place.

QUESTION: Given as you say that the search within the Muslim world for an answer to the question of what went wrong, and also the relatively small number of committed Islamists anyway, do you see any potential for some sort of reformation movement developing within Islam as a potential solution to what went wrong?

DR DANIEL PIPES: I am hopeful for a reformation, that there are and will be Muslims who re-read the scriptures of Islam in light of modern times. This is the opposite of what Islamists believe. Islamists take the scriptures and read them in a severe and archaic way. This proves, at any rate, that the scriptures are wide open to interpretation. A debate, I should add, is now taking place in the West between those, like me, who say that Islam is a historical phenomenon that changes and another group that says, "No, Islam is unchangeable, it is an essential core. Jihad is this, the Koran is that. It's unchangeable and Islam is an enemy."

QUESTION: In relation to the European experience in the Islamic Balkans, is there anything that we can take from that and extrapolate more widely? Is there anything that happened in the last 20 years in the Balkans that may lead us to believe that we're not necessarily going into that dark period?

DR DANIEL PIPES: I would, unfortunately, draw the opposite conclusion. Balkan Islam was moderate. Then along came the Wahhabis, the Saudis, their money, their institutions and it's changing toward Islamism as are other parts of the Muslim world. Historically, the more repressive movements came from the Middle East and that they influence the periphery. You can see how powerful they Islamists have become in Nigeria, Bangladesh and Indonesia. People often say, "Well, can you take Indonesian ideas to the Middle East" and I reply, "It's worth a try, good luck", but I doubt the Saudis are going to listen to Indonesians.

QUESTION: Last century I visited Istanbul a couple of times. It impressed me as a modern European city, certainly in comparison with other Muslim cities like Cairo. So my question is why do you think the liberal model failed or is failing at the moment in Turkey?

DR DANIEL PIPES: You are asking "Who lost Turkey?" Of course, it may not be lost and things could still work out. That said, what likely will have lost Turkey was not European coolness. Nor economic problems. Rather, it concerns the seemingly small matter of Turkish electoral law which requires that representation in parliament be limited to parties that win 10% of the vote, a very high threshold. In other countries the threshold is on the order of 1%, 2% or 5%. In 2002 the vote was 34% for the AKP and 19% for the CHP, the leftist party. And the AKP's 34% resulted in it gaining 67% or two-thirds of the seats. Had that election law been different, or had the moderate left and moderate right managed to work together, I the AKP would not have dominated as it did.

QUESTION: So you think rather than Turkish society becoming more radically Muslim, it's just the vagaries of politics and it could swing back?

DR DANIEL PIPES: Yes, it could swing back. I think the next general elections, which take place in 2011, are critical. Should the AKP win this, it's over. They're there for a long time. Should they lose it, it can be redeemed. So, the next election is the key.

QUESTION: How does the Obama Administration, including the top brass in the Pentagon and within State, see the situation? Is there any clarity of understanding or appreciation of the magnitude of this whole phenomenon?

DR DANIEL PIPES: I mentioned the debate between people of my persuasion who think the problem is radical Islam and those who think the problem is Islam itself. But there is a third position I didn't mention. This is the establishment position, which is the position of most of those in government, journalists and academics who believe that the problem really has nothing to do with Islam at all. It's the problem of radical extremism, of terrorism, of Al-Qaeda. Some politicians go so far as to say it's an anti-Islamic phenomenon. This is the prevailing attitude of the Obama Administration. Whatever the topic might be, they bleach Islam out of it.

To give you one example. The Fort Hood Massacre in November of last year when an army major of Palestinian-Muslim background took out a gun and killed 14 people. Every sign indicated he was a jihadi. But the report that came out recently on what happened didn't mention Islam. The cause of this denial here lies deeper than political correctness. If you're going to acknowledge it's something to do with Islam, then you have to address Islamic issues. Institutionally, if you're the US military, that's not easy to do, so you don't.

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