Islamist Movements in the Middle East and Resistance to Imperial Peace

Michel Andraos
mandraos@ctu.edu

Part of *JRER* Volume 1, Issue 13

Resisting Imperial Peace
by the US Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians
edited by Michel Andraos and Andrea Smith

> There are numerous historical examples of peoples' resistance to imperial rule rooted in and inspired by a renewal or transformation of their own traditional way of life. ... In both the recent Iranian revolution and ancient Judean movements and revolts, subjected people pursued renewal of their own traditional way of life in resistance to threatened disintegration by imperial power.
>
> Richard Horsley, *Religion and Empire*

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

The intersection of the political and the religious in everyday life and in society has been a feature of Middle Eastern cultures since ancient times, which goes back several thousand years in history and is unlikely to change in the near future. Peoples' religious beliefs, personal and collective, and their sense of belonging to a religion intersect with many aspects of public life, including social and political participation, and communal ethnic identity. Beliefs and religious belonging are integrated within both the popular movements of resistance to domination as well as within the ideology and social structures that support power elites. This has been a permanent cultural feature since ancient times. The narratives of origin of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which continue to co-exist in the Middle East today—although in some variations from the original forms—are primarily stories of religions of resistance to dominant political, social and religious structures. Such religious movements of revival and resistance are not unique to the Abrahamic religions; they have been common features among many religions and existed across history.[1]

During the last decades, however, the Middle East has become, again, the scene of a new wave of religious revival and movements of resistance (and at times of revolution), which are generally referred to in the West as movements of Islamic extremism. Today, these movements

---

[1]For examples of such movements across history, see Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed* (New York: Mentor Books, 1965). For a more recent study on historical examples of religious resistance, ancient and modern, see Richard Horsley, *Religion and Empire: People, Power, and the Life of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); and the newly published Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

play a major role in the current social and political developments and have significant impact on the future of peace in the region and beyond. In the West, it is generally accepted as a fact among average people—and not only among the politically uneducated—that the greatest threat facing the "civilized" world and the future of humanity is Muslim extremism. "Extremist Islamic groups," an umbrella term used for a variety of Islamist movements without differentiation, are perceived to all be part of a pan-Islamic "*jihad*" project that is incompatible with "modernity" and "civilization" and that is promoting terrorism against the West, especially the U.S. This *jihad* global project is considered to be the main obstacle to world peace and the main challenge to the "civilized" world in the 21st century. All other world problems, such as global poverty, unjust global economic and financial systems, ecological devastation, military domination and conflicts around the world, the scarcity of food, water and medical care for large sectors of the world population etc. have become insignificant in view of this imminent, mysterious and terrifying new phenomenon and its immediate danger.

A number of questions guide my reflections in this chapter: Are all Islamist movements founded on fixed, extremist and unchangeable religious ideologies? Can some Islamist movements become a positive social and political force of resistance to domination and contribute to building democratic states and making peace? If playing such a role is possible in certain circumstances, as this paper will argue, then why do many people in the West persist in thinking of these movements as unchangeable, extremist and terrorist?

For answering these questions, I chose to focus on the recent Shi'a revival movements in Lebanon since the 1960s, which received significant attention in the world media over the past

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

decades. In the first part, I will situate the current tensions of the Middle East in the complex, long history of resistance to colonial and imperial dominance. In light of this background, using the case of the Shi'a of Lebanon and their recent movements of resistance, I will trace briefly the development of these new Islamist movements that now play a significant political and social role in Lebanon and beyond, and have an impact on the future of peace in the region. This part will focus in particular on Hizbullah, an organization that, accused of terrorism in the 1980s, has evolved over the last two decades from a narrow sectarian Islamist movement to a national political party, a social movement with broad grassroots support across religious and political lines, and has become a significant actor in the rebuilding of the post-war Lebanese state. The development of Hizbullah and its new emerging role, I will argue in conclusion, opens new horizons for thinking about Islamist movements. Like other social and political movements, these movements are capable of transformation and adaptation in changing contexts and could become potential contributors to building modern, democratic states and to peacemaking.

The Regional Context: A Brief Background

In his seminal work *Resurrecting Empire*, historian and political analyst Rashid Khalidi presents a succinct background for understanding the anti-imperial struggles in the Middle East today.[2] Khalidi outlines the history of these struggles against foreign interventions and domination by European colonial powers since the 18th century. These struggles, he argues, took a new turn after World War II. The "end" of the European colonial era was quickly replaced by

---

[2]Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

the U.S., the new ascending world power. Khalidi analyses at length the history, development and shifts in U.S. foreign policy in the region up to the present phase of the Iraq war and the design of a "New Middle East."[3] He also argues that in addition to external intervention, the entire Arab world "is blighted by a group of remarkably similar regimes that share several characteristics in common, notably their stagnant political systems and the ubiquitous, brutal efficiency of the means of repression that keep their respective oligarchies safely in power to siphon off and profit from their societies' surplus."[4] In the same vein like Khalidi, Samir Kassir, the late Palestinian-Lebanese historian, journalist and activist, argues in his reflections on the misfortune of the Arabs that throughout the 20th century, and unlike other part of the world that experienced some freedom and progress after the end of the colonial period, the Arab world continued to face an imperial threat.[5] Western colonial hegemony, he points out, which appeared to be declining after World War II, began a new phase through supporting the rising power of the State of Israel, the ongoing occupation of Palestine, and the direct U.S. intervention in the region. The Middle East, adds Kassir, is the only region in the world where Western powers, including Israel, continue to impose policy on local governments and rulers.[6] The internal and external patterns of colonial/neocolonial/imperial domination mentioned above, have been (and continue

---

[3]For a discussion on the vision behind the Bush administration's Middle East policy see Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*, 50-51.

[4]Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*, 69.

[5]Samir Kassir, *Ta'amulaat fi shaqaa' al-'arab* (reflections on the misfortune of the Arabs), in Arabic, Dar An-Nahar, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005. This posthumous publication by Kassir appeared shortly after his assassination on June 2, 2005 by a terrorist bomb. For an English translation of this work, see Samir Kassir, *Being Arab* (Verso, 2006).

[6]See Kassir, *Ta'amulaat fi shaqaa' al-'arab*, 91-121.

to be) a source of systemic violence that deeply impacts the peoples of the region in the structures of daily life. While resistance movements until the 1960s were mostly made of secular, nationalist political groups, the situation began to change in the 1970s when new Islamist groups started to emerge and play a prominent role in local and regional politics, as the situation in Lebanon I discuss below clearly demonstrates.

This brief historical reading of the regional context certainly complicates the discussion about violence, peace and the role of Islamist groups. *'Ihbaat,* an Arabic word that translates to something like total failure, is a term one often hears among common people in the Middle East today that is used to describe the overall performance of their governments and states. This is particularly true in a country like Lebanon. It is in this context that new movements of social protest, including Islamist groups, have emerged and received wide popular support. Islamist groups, however, differ widely in terms of their ideology, level of organization, strategy and capacity, and also in terms of their political alliance. Within the same religious community, such as among the Sunnis of Lebanon for example, some groups support the pro-U.S. political and economic agenda while others are in the forefront of opposition.[7] In order to examine the complex question concerning Islamist groups, violence and peacemaking, I will now turn to discuss the origin of the Shi'a movements of resistance in Lebanon as one example.

---

[7]Even in a small country like Lebanon, there are over 100 different Islamist groups that are active in the political and social life of the country, most of whom belong to Sunni Islam. These groups play a significant role in local and regional politics and have a major influence on the question of peace and violence in Lebanon and the region. For a recent survey of some these groups, see the paper by Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Center, No. 6, January 2008, www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs (accessed October 1, 2008).

Genesis and Development of the New Shi'a Resistance Movements in Lebanon

Being a religious minority in the region, the Shi'a of Lebanon endured sociopolitical and economic marginalization for a long period of time during the modern era; first under the rule of the Ottoman empire, which lasted five centuries (from the early 16th century until the early 20th century), and more recently during the period of formation of the new state of Lebanon under the French Mandate, which began at the end of World War I. In the emerging state of Lebanon, the Shi'a were underrepresented in the political system, and as mostly rural communities, they were also marginalized in the country's economic activity, which centered around the capital Beirut that was inhabited mostly by Sunni Muslims and Christians of various denominations. This situation continued more or less unchanged during the 1940s and 1950s, the period of Lebanon's independence and modernization.[8] In the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to economic and political marginalization, the villages in the southern part of the country, where mostly Shi'a communities live and work in farming tobacco, were subject to frequent attacks by the Israeli army in retaliation to the intensification of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) operations. Entire communities had to leave their villages on several occasions and for long periods of time. Hundreds of thousands of Shi'a were refugees in their own country for decades with little assistance from the Lebanese government or international organizations.

---

[8]For an explanation of the reasons of marginalization of the Shi'a in Lebanon, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 14-18.

Many books have been written about the Shi'a mobilization and resistance movements in Lebanon since the 1970s. Histories of social movements are complex, particularly when they are centered around reinterpretation of founding religious narratives. The history of Shi'a movements in Lebanon is no exception. However, there seems to be an agreement among many scholars on the main elements that contributed to the rise and consolidation of these movements.

In her book *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon,* cultural anthropologist Lara Deeb offers a succinct summary of this history. Until the 1960s, notes Deeb, most Shi'a communities still lived in the rural areas in poverty conditions that were worse than other parts of the country. Following government modernization programs that established road networks and "replaced earlier economic bases with cash crops like tobacco," observes Deeb, many rural Shi'a migrated to the capital city of Beirut and "settled in a ring of suburbs around the capital, known as the 'misery belt.'"[9] During that period, several members of that community joined secular leftist political parties, such as the Lebanese Communist Party and other Arab nationalist political groups, including Palestinian organizations. Frustrated by the incapacity of these parties to bring concrete change to the political system, Shi'a young people and political activists gradually began to leave these parties and join the religious revival movements that evolved around their Imams, particularly Musa al-Sadr, a charismatic cleric and emerging national leader.

---

[9]Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 72-73. See also by the same author, "Hizballah: A Primer," *Middle East Report Online*, July 31, 2006 www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html.

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

Al-Sadr, born in Iran of Lebanese ancestry, had studied first in Qum and later in Najaf, before he came to Lebanon in the late 1950s. Since his early years as Imam in southern Lebanon, he expressed deep concern for sociopolitical change and in a short time became a prominent voice within the Shi'a community and at a national level. In an effort to organize the community, he founded in 1967 the "Highest Islamic Shi'a Council", and a few years later in 1974 *Harakat al-Mahroumin* (Movement of the Deprived). This new political organization, which was dedicated to achieving political rights for the marginalized Shi'a, also became a military organization under the name *AMAL*—an Arabic acronym for "Brigades of Lebanese Resistance." Al-Sadr is only one of many leaders who emerged during that period, but he certainly played a key role in the early formation of the Shi'a renewal and resistance movements.[10] Under al-Sadr's influence, notes Richard Augustus Norton, "religious commemorations became vehicles for building communal solidarity and political consciousness."[11] The following excerpt from a speech al-Sadr gave in 1974 on the occasion of the 'Ashura, the commemoration of the Martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Karbala in the 7th century C.E., is a clear indication of the revolutionary spirit of the movement that al-Sadr represented back then. In al-Sadr's words,

> The revolution did not die in the sands of Karbala, it flowed into the life stream of the Islamic world, and passed from generation to generation, even to our day. It is a deposit placed in our hands so that we may profit from it, that we draw out from it as from a source of a new reform, a new position, a new movement, a new revolution to repel the darkness, to stop tyranny, and to pulverize evil.

---

[10]See Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*, 37-56; and also by the same author, *Hezbollah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 18-21.

[11]Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*, 41.

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

> Brothers, line up in the row of your choice: that of tyranny or that of Hussain. I am certain that you will not choose anything but the row of revolution and martyrdom for the realization of justice and the destruction of tyranny.[12]

As mentioned above, al-Sadr was not an isolated voice; he was part of a broader clerical movement. In the 1960s, notes Naim Qassem, Lebanon "witnessed the beginnings of an active clerical movement that served to re-invigorate Islam's key principles." This movement was initiated by a number of Islamic clerics who just came back from the Shi'a schools of religion in Najaf (Iraq) and began to apply new interpretations—as opposed to "traditional" interpretations—of the teachings of Islam to the daily reality of the people.[13] The above quotation from al-Sadr's speech is a good example of the new interpretation promoted by the new clerical movement, which continues to be reiterated at the annual 'Ashura festivals in Shi'a communities to the present day. While the traditional interpretations focused on guilt feeling and personal pain and suffering in association with Imam Hussain's experience, the new interpretations focus on the present social context and the issues of oppression and injustice in the life of the community. The new interpretation provided what Jurgensmeyer would call an "ideology of empowerment and protest."[14]

---

[12]Thom Sicking and Shereen Khairallah, "The Shi'a Awakening in Lebanon: A Search for Radical Change in a Traditional Way," *Vision and Revision in Arab Society, 1974, CEMAM Reports, 2(1975), 115-116. Quoted in Norton, Amal and the Shi'a*, 40-41.

[13] Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within,* trans. from the Arabic by Dalia Khalil (London: SAQI, 2005), 13.

[14]Jurgensmeyer, *Global Rebellion,* 254.

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

The combination of a new interpretation of the early religious narratives of oppression and liberation adapted to the experience of the Shi'a in Lebanon; the political experience of many activists from a variety of political organizations who began to join the new movement; and the presence of a group of well-trained and articulate religious leaders, among other factors, were some of the key elements for the continuity, development and future success of the Shi'a revival and the movements that emerged from that revival.[15] In addition to these internal religious and social factors, there were also several external factors related to the political changes that contributed to shaping the context in which these movements evolved. The decade of the seventies was a period of turmoil in the region. The clash between the Jordanian regime and the Palestinian organizations in 1969, which lead to the migration of these organizations and their centers of activities from Jordan to Lebanon; the Arab-Israeli war in 1973; the beginning of the so called Lebanese civil war in 1975; and the mobilization in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, are only some of the important events that directly influenced the Shi'a movements. One additional factor, that probably had the most impact, was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which lead to the coming of a multinational UN peace keeping force to Beirut with the task of supervising the evacuation of the PLO from the country. That force, which included U.S., French and Italian troops, among other nationalities, had to eventually leave the country under the pressure of the attacks by several armed resistance groups. In the midst of all these changes, however, it became evident, even since the mid 1970s, that the religio-political

[15]Al-Sadr was not the only leader during that period; Ayatullah Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddine, and the late Ayatullah Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah also played a significant role in the mobilization of the Shi'a, especially after the mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr while visiting President Quaddafi of Libya in 1978.

revival of the Shi'a was irreversible and that it would have significant implications for the future of Lebanon and the region in the years to come. It is out of this revival and resistance movements that Hizbullah emerged in the following years as a splinter group that in a short time became a unifying movement and military resistance to the Israeli occupation of the southern part of Lebanon which lasted from 1976-2000.

Hizbullah: Resistance, Violence and Peacemaking

There are two main charges by the West and its allies in the region against Islamist movements in general and Hizbullah in particular: 1) terrorism; and 2) promoting an Islamic way of life and a religio-political structure that are incompatible with building a democratic, modern state, which is a pre-condition for joining "modernity" and the "civilized" world. In the dominant political discourse in the West today, these accusations provide a cultural context for the general public to legitimize the ongoing so called war on terrorism for dismantling such groups and "civilizing" their people and countries. Despite the ambiguity in defining terms such as *civilized world*, *modernity,* and *terrorism*, these accusations still carry significant cultural and political power.

On the ground, however, Hizbullah today is the most popular and most influential movement among the Shi'a of Lebanon. As mentioned above, it emerged from the core of their movements of religious revival and resistance and in many ways it represents these movements. Anthropologist Lara Deeb, among others, believes that this group, misrepresented in the West as a terrorist organization, has grown over time significantly and developed into both a legitimate

political party and an umbrella organization of social welfare institutions in the absence of a functional state. In addition to its dedication to the poor and social justice, Hizbullah's ideologies, adds Deeb, appeal to other Lebanese movements of resistance across religious, ethnic and class lines. The organization and its allies are "viewed as providing a viable alternative to a US-supported government and its neo-liberal economic project," maintains Deeb.[16] Moreover, political analyst Amal Saad-Ghorayeb argues that the organization has evolved over the years to become a national movement of resistance to the "New Middle East," the Bush Administration's plan of imperial peace, which the Hizbullah and its allies clearly see as advancing the U.S.-Israeli hegemony over the region.[17] Under the Obama Administration, the new rhetoric of openness and dialogue so far has not brought any substantial change on the ground.

Hizbullah today has members in the Lebanese parliament, ministers in the government, is a key player in an opposition coalition that represents the majority of the Lebanese, and is also part of the recent national unity government. This opposition consists of political organizations that range from Islamist groups (including some Sunni groups) to leftist secular and Christian nationalist political parties. Although Hizbullah has strong military capability, its main strength lies in its grassroots social base and network. "It is impossible," notes Norton, "to appreciate the striking durability and loyalty that modern Shi'i groups, such as Hezbollah (or comparable groups in Iraq, for instance), generate unless one understands that their strength derives from the

---

[16]Deeb, "Hizballah: A Primer."

[17]Amal Saad-Ghorayeb and Marina Ottaway, "Hizbollah and Its Changing Identities." Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook: Democracy and Rule of the Law Program, November 2007, 1. <www.carnegieendowment.org/publications>.

strong social fabric that they have woven over the years."[18] The state of Israel, backed by the U.S., has unsuccessfully tried on several occasions to destroy the military capability and the social support base of Hizbullah. Over the years, several of its leaders have been assassinated by Israeli forces, and in the summer of 2006 Israel launched a 33 day full scale war that destroyed most of Lebanon's infrastructure and caused more than one thousand civilian victims in an attempt to disarm Hizbullah. The operation failed to achieve its objectives and Hizbullah emerged after the war stronger than before, both in terms of its military power and popularity. This war has exposed the limits of the military power of both the U.S. and Israel in dealing with such resistance movements.

What is of particular interest to this paper, in the development of such a movement of Islamic resistance, is the new relations of solidarity that it is forging with other religious, political and cultural groups. Hizbullah has now allies that include Sunni groups, a large sector of the Christian community of Lebanon, as well as other religious and secular political groups. Together, these groups formed an opposition coalition to the "New Middle East" project of the previous U.S. administration and to the neoliberal policies of the recent consecutive governments of Lebanon, supported by traditional elites, financial tycoons and some Western powers. From the point of view of the opposition coalition, the neoliberal economic policies of the government, instead of solving the accumulated problems of poverty, unbalanced development, and marginalization, have exacerbated these problems. While Lebanon continues to be a rich country, a large sector of its population today does not have access to decent public services such as

---

[18]Norton, *Hezbollah,* 112.

healthcare, education, transportation systems, communications, etc. Public services in all the above mentioned sectors, if at all existent, are mediocre and not reliable. Inflation and high living costs for basic services such as transportation, drinking water, electricity, and communication services, in addition to a high rate of unemployment, especially among youth, make it extremely difficult for average people to survive. Addressing these forms of social violence, which are embedded in the structures of daily life, is among the key social demands of the opposition coalition, including Hizbullah. Despite international, regional and local enormous pressures against the opposition coalition, it has demonstrated over the past years, especially since the 2006 war, the potential for non-violent political and social transformation, and more importantly, for inter-communal/interreligious collaboration in the area of social peacemaking.

Beyond the Violent Confrontation of Western Modernity

This paper does not endorse the thesis of the inevitable clash of civilizations and religions between the two imaginaries of the "West" and "Islam."[19] Such thesis, I believe, is inadequate for explaining the multi-dimensional tensions and confrontations in the Middle East and the rest of the world today. Blaming all the world's ills on Islamic *jihad* is neither accurate nor helpful for achieving world peace. The works of the proponents of a "clash of civilizations" discourse, who over the past few years got significantly more attention than they deserve, are not very helpful for understanding the issues of Islam and violence in the Middle East and elsewhere. Such theses

---

[19]See for example the well-known works by Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), both national bestsellers.

are not new, but they keep re-emerging in new voices from the same old choir. Those who hold such views believe that the "war on terrorism" goes hand in hand with the war for "civilizing" Islam, and in particular the Middle East. "Because the war on terrorism is a war against Islamist reaction, victory cannot ultimately be achieved without the modernization of Islam," contends senior scholar and philosopher Richard Dien Winfield in his recently written book *Modernity, Religion, and the War on Terror*.[20] "Terrorist groups can be dismantled. Religious political parties can be prohibited and clerics can be banned from holding public office," adds Winfield, and the "Quality secular education can be made universally available. Palestinian independence can be won, United States forces can leave the Fertile Crescent and the Gulf, and unprecedented efforts can be made to diminish the glaring inequalities between the nations who modernized themselves and those subject to external modernization. Yet none of these measures will suffice to rid modernity of its greatest pre-modern antagonist unless Islam fully modernize itself."[21]

Edward Said, the late Palestinian-American intellectual and activist, has amply critiqued these theses in his several books and articles on "Orientalism" since the late 1970s. In his critique of Bernard Lewis's work on the incompatibility of Islam and Western modernity, which is also the basis Winfield's thesis, Said argues that such views are "utterly conventional in their derivation from nineteenth-century Orientalists of the British and French school, who saw Islam

---

[20]Richard Dien Winfield, *Modernity, Religion, and the War on Terror* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), 111.

[21]Winfield, *Modernity, Religion, and the War on Terror*, 111. In his key chapter on "Islam and Modernity," Winfield makes reference more than 40 times to the two above mentioned popular and controversial books by Bernard Lewis, who appears to be the author's main and almost only source on Islam.

a danger to Christianity and liberal values." Lewis [and the followers of this thesis], argues Said, are totally unable "to grant that the Islamic peoples are entitled to their own cultural, political, and historical practices." The main emphasis of this thesis, adds Said, is "to portray the whole of Islam as basically *outside* the known, familiar, acceptable world that 'we' inhibit ... because they are not Western ... they can't be good."[22]

While some cultural analysts in the West like to interpret the resistance to the U.S. hegemony as an irreconcilable clash of civilizations, reducing the world to the civilized "us," and uncivilized "them," Arab American historian Ussama Makdisi notes that the

> Anti-Americanism is a recent phenomenon fueled by American foreign policy, not an epochal confrontation of civilizations. While there are certainly those in both the United States and the Arab world who believe in a clash of civilizations and who invest politically in such beliefs, history belies them. Indeed, at the time of World War I the image of the United States in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire was generally positive; those Arabs who knew of the country saw it as a great power that was not imperialist as Britain, France, and Russia were. … But over the course of the twentieth century, American policies in the region profoundly complicated the meaning of America for Arabs.[23]

The theses on the confrontation of civilizations, in addition to not having broad historical grounds, also fails to see the new possibilities for rethinking old unjust relationships in a time of changing social and political realities, as in the Middle East today. Throughout *An Enchanted*

---

[22]Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, revised edition 1997), Introduction to the Vintage Edition, xxx. Said has written three books on the theme of Orientalism: *Orientatlism* (1978); *The Question of Palestine* (1979); and *Covering Islam* (1981).

[23]Ussama Makdisi, "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World: An Interpretation of a Brief History," *Journal of American History* (September 2002): 538-557.

Modern, Deeb tries to demonstrate how the new interpretation of the Shi'a tradition in the sociopolitical context of Lebanon over the past decades played a crucial role in the emergence of this community as both *pious and modern*. The Shi'a new piety, which is rooted in a new "contextual" interpretation of tradition, has helped move the community from marginalization and isolation to become a main protagonist of its own progress and aspire to the building of a pluralist, democratic and just society and state. According to this ideal of the *pious modern*, notes Deeb, "One could not be fully 'modern' ... if either the material or the spiritual were missing. Spiritual development alone was not complete without the drive to improve one's situation materially, and material progress alone would lead to the empty modernity of the West—spiritually and morally vacuous, and therefore incomplete."[24] Is there room for dialogue between the "clash of civilizations" protagonists of Western modernity and other, different experiences of modern-ness? or is the clash inevitable? Will imposing one monolithic, controversial understanding of Western modernity violently on other peoples and cultures and calling those who contest it terrorists advance civilization and world peace?

The "constructed opposition between an 'anti-modern' Islam and a 'modern' West, in Deeb's words, is not new. "It should go without saying," she argues, "that such a constructed polarization of the world erases far more than it clarifies. In addition to erasing the difference among Muslims and various Islamic politics, it most glaringly erases the effects of U.S. policy in the Middle East and around the world."[25] The above insights from Deeb, Makdisi and Said, and the brief analysis presented at the beginning of this paper by Khalidi and Kassir, which are only a

---

[24]Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 228-229.

[25]Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 230.

©Sopher Press (contact jrer@sopherpress.com)

few of the many alternative voices, I believe, help unmask the gap in understanding both the historical context and the current reality of the struggles for peace with dignity in parts of the Middle East today.

The situation in Lebanon is not indicative of all what is happening in the region, and the Shi'a revival and Hizbullah do not represent all the Islamist movements in whole Middle East. However, probably for the first time in their recent history, and after a long night of silence, the Shi'a of Lebanon today are protagonists and subjects of a new modern-ness in the religious, social, cultural, economic and political spheres that cannot be dismissed. Domination, manipulation and militarism cannot be the only available options for building "peace." In a time of change and social transformation, new protagonists call for a radical rethinking of old categories or religion, civilization, violence and peace, if we are to take seriously the dialogue of civilizations and religions, and peace in the Middle East in the 21st century.