Islamist Movements: One View from the West

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This paper invites you to look over my shoulder to watch one Westerner as he tries to understand how some Islamist movements interact with governments, how these movements gather followers who often move from friendly collaboration to risking security and lives in public protests, strikes and, sometimes, in armed violence. This study requires much further investigation and the sources I cite can certainly be supplemented. But this is a start.

My exposition will look at the Algerian and Egyptian movements: FIS and GIA in Algeria, and The Muslim Brotherhood and Al Jamma’a al-Islamiyya in Egypt. Each country developed reform movements that attempted to collaborate with the government and other revolutionary movements which sought to forcibly overthrow their governments. We will look at the most accepted model of social movement theory to trace the movements as their leaders (especially the Egyptians, Hassan al-Banni, Sayyid Qutb and Ayman Zawahiri) attempted to compromise with their governments, moved to confront them and finally split into movements that continue to compromise and those who violently oppose the status quo.

Yes, we know this investigation involves complicated material. Even some Islamists have been misunderstood by fellow activists. When Hind Chelbi, an Algerian student, publicly contradicted President Habib Bourguiba’s vision of the role of Islamic women by draping herself in a hijab and refusing the paternal kiss of the old leader, the political class radically misunderstood the episode, judging her a fundamentalist, “a voice of primitive Islam destined to disappear before the latest advance of modernity.” Burgat (20). In reality, Chelbi was protesting the political leadership’s failure to apply Islam to economic, social and civil rights issues. Fellow Islamists misunderstood her action. When can modern protest be confused with fundamentalism?

In another case, Zawahiri did not anticipate the general Egyptian revulsion at what he saw as justified punishment of two 13 year olds. The secret service had not only turned the boys into spies against al-Jama’a but also filmed their raping by Egyptian officers. From Zawahiri’s standpoint Islam demanded that they publicly execute the boys in order to cleanse the double dishonor of spying and being raped. But the Egyptian public’s shock to what he saw as Islam startled him (Wright). In other words, even Islamists, no less Westerners, need to step warily when approaching Islamic movements.

My second section follows editorials chiefly from the Middle Eastern press, book length studies that are pertinent to our specific interest, and the website, Conflicts Forum.

Hopefully, these sources will help us appreciate the Islamists’ long list of grievances against their own governments and the enmity they feel toward international
forces that threaten their cultural and religious values. Understanding and responding to these angers can be the basis for a positive response to Islamist movements.

Material for this presentation is based on the following:

Twice Weekly readings of English language editorials of newspapers from Lebanon, Jordan, Cairo, Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bahrain, Kuwait and Al Jazeera. Plus The New Times and the Washington Post.

Naim Ateek: Suicide Bombers (a Palestinian booklet).
Francois Burgat: Face to Face with Political Islam, 2003
Jason Burke: True Story of Radical Islam, 2004
Juan R. Cole: Encountering Muslims, 2009
William Dowell and Francois Burgat; The Islamic Movement in North Africa, 1993
John Gray: Al-Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern, 2003
Richard Mitchell: Society of the Muslim Brothers, 1969
Quintan Wiktorowicz, editor: A Social Movement Theory Approach, 2004
Lawrence Wright: The Looming Tower, 2007

Conflicts Forum – Beirut, London, Washington
Curriculum Vitae
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Academic History

Ph.D.  American Studies; University of Texas at Austin. 1985.
Dissertation: “Isaac Hecker: Brook Farm Transcendentalist Influences”

M.A.  American Literature; University of Texas at Austin. 1972.
Thesis: “Anti-Intellectualism in Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test”


B.A.  American Literature and Philosophy, Fordham University, NY, NY. 1952.

Academic and Administrative Positions:

2007  Recipient of a CAORC Senior Fellowship at the American Center for
Oriental Research, Amman, Jordan to visit and research American Studies
degree programs in the Middle East.

2005-2006 Visiting Professor of American Studies; Faculty of Literature. The
University of Jordan at Amman.

2004-2005 Fulbright Senior Scholar, the Graduate Program in American Studies;
The University of Jordan at Amman.

2000-2003 Visiting Professor of American Studies, Bilkent University; Ankara
Turkey.

2000-2003 Secretary to ARIT, American Research Institute Turkey; Ankara, Turkey

1999-2000 Visiting Professor of American Studies; Department of Literature and the
Department of Visual Arts; La Universidad de los Andes; Merida, Ve.


1997-1999 A member of the president’s council, Southwest Conference on Latin
America.

1977-1999 Professor of Humanities; Austin Community College; Austin, Texas

1975-1976 Acquisitions Editor for Humanities; University of Texas Press.

1972-1975 Administrative Assistant to the Provost, the University of Texas at Austin.

Bibliographic Citations:

2009 “Liberty and Justice: the Pilgrims and Hector de Crevecour,” Proceedings of the
Second International Conference, Liberty and Justice: American and the Middle
East,” (CASAR), AUB.

2007 “American Studies in the Middle East: a Proposal,” co-authored with
Eileen T. Lundy: Proceedings of the Conference, America in the Middle East, the
Middle East in America,” (CASAR), AUB.

Reprinted (in English) on the website of the U.S. State Department, Amman, Jordan, June 2003.

1993/1997 Wrote, produced and hosted 86, thirty minute television programs about education and career opportunities in Austin, Texas: Public Television, Channel 10.

Some recent conference presentations:


2008 “Overview of American Studies Programs in the Middle East,” ACOR, Amman

2007 “American Studies Programs in the Middle East” with Eileen T. Lundy.

Conference of International American Studies: Lisbon, Portugal. October.

2006 “American Studies in the Middle East: a Proposal,” (CASAR), AUB.


2005 “Preparation for Leadership: American Studies Programs in the Middle East, with Professor Eileen T. Lundy, Fulbright Global Leadership Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, July 21, 2005


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