



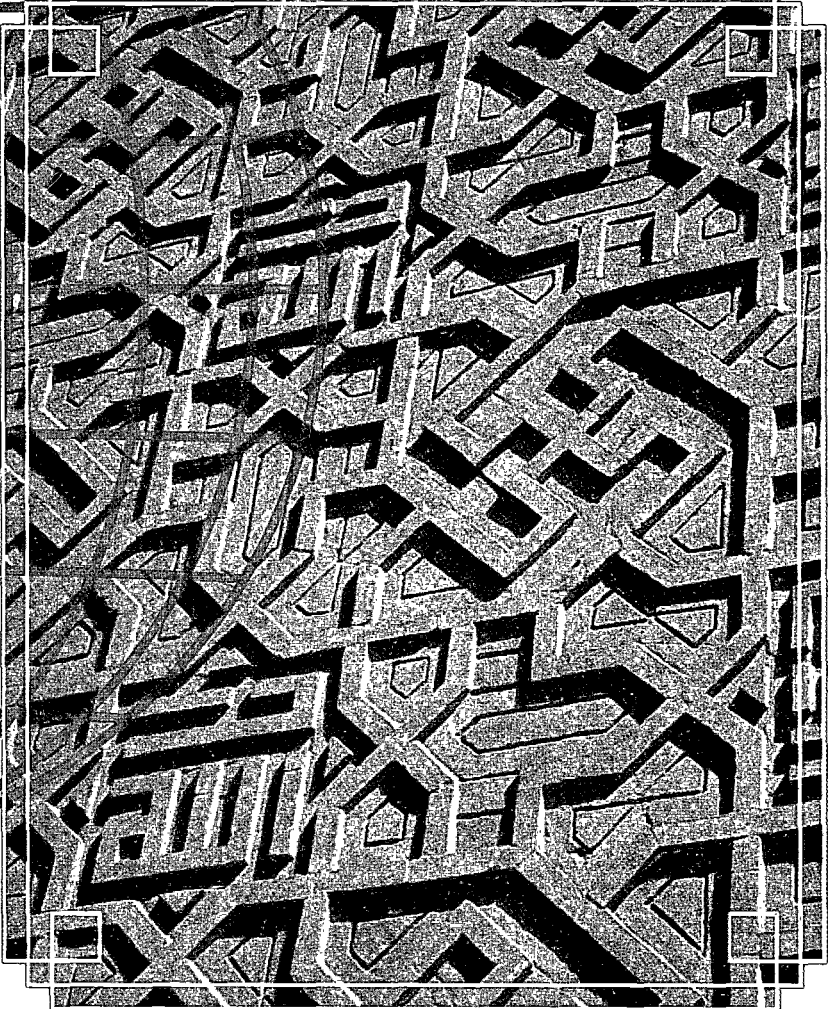
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IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES TO US/MUSLIM/ARAB RELATIONS
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. JOHN ESPOSITO



Professor John Esposito has been America's leading academic authority on Islam and Muslims for more than two decades. With the publication of numerous books and articles on Islamic resurgence and the political affairs of the Muslim world, Prof. John Esposito has distinguished himself as an analyst and commentator on the region and its movements. As head of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Prof. Esposito has fostered mutual respect and cooperation between East and West that is highly regarded. Dr. Muhamad Olimat conducted this interview with Prof. John Esposito in his office at Georgetown University.

Q: The 20th Century can be classified as a disaster for Arabs and Muslims. Arabs and Muslims were subjected to colonization and exploitation. After independence they lagged far behind in economic development. How can Arabs and Muslims learn from the lessons of the past century in order to build stable and prosperous societies?

A: At issue is not merely the relationship of Arabs and Muslims with the West, but the dynamics of the Arab and Muslim societies themselves.

If there is to be an Arab agenda or a Muslim one this agenda has to be worked out among Arabs and Muslims in order to build some sense of unity. One of the revelations of the twentieth century is the tremendous division within the Arab and Muslim world. Regrettably one talks a good deal about Arab unity, and also about

Muslim unity, but there has been none. The relationships between Egypt and Libya or the Sudan and Egypt, show the deepness of such division. I remember very vividly riding a taxicab from San Francis hotel in San Francisco to the airport, when the young cab driver, a Palestinian, lamented that the only lessons Palestinians learned is that they can't count on anybody. They can't count on their fellow Arabs and they can't count on the West.

Strength comes from identification of common bonds and an ability to work together. The determining variable is not U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab world, the Muslim, and Israel. It is the unity or lack of unity among the Arabs and Muslims.

The second issue is governance in the Arab-Muslim world, i.e. authoritarianism viz a viz political participation and civil society. Unless many of these governments change the way they govern societal affairs, the entire region will suffer. One can't imagine the existence of civil societies or economic development when people are not free to speak. A good example is the brain drain. Good minds move to greater opportunities outside the Arab and Muslim world.

Q: We live in a world characterized by the advent of "globalization" as a comprehensive system and as a new outlook on international affairs. Muslims look at global arrangements as a continuation of Western crusades against the Islamic world, and as a new type of hegemony. Is this a fair understanding of globalization? If not, how can Muslims improve their status within the newly emerging global system? How can they turn the challenges of globalization into opportunities so they can benefit from its fruits?

A: Globalization sounds ambivalent. On the one hand, it provides many opportunities, but it also poses many challenges. Therefore, I think that if one talks about global markets, for example, there can be tremendous opportunities. But the concern of Muslims and many developing countries is dependency, increased dependency, and exploitation by the new global arrangements. The danger is that those who control global markets through com-

munications and finance can dominate the process of development. In the 21st century, as I explain in my new book, *The Future of Islam: Muslims in the 21st Century*, however, it becomes very important not to slip into the rhetoric of the Western crusades against the Muslim world. We should worry not only about Orientalism, but about Occidentalism, i.e. stereotyping the West. Even when there are points of conflict you can't always reduce them simply to the crusades.

Yes, there are many Pat Robertson's in the world that seem to deal in monolithic stereotypes, but the majority of policy makers are following what they perceive as "national interests." They may have a distorted image of national interest, but they are not functioning within the crusades mentality. By reviving the crusades mentality, Muslims disempower their own community. You are using not the language of empowerment but of victimization.

Having said all of this, I think there are real issues with regard of globalization, and I think it is important for both those in the Muslim world and those outside the Muslim world to provide the kind of critique that keeps people aware of the consequences of globalization. It is very important, for example, that international communication not become blindly a perpetuation of Western dominance of the global mass media, so that the media can express the views of other nations, not only Western ones. You know *Aljazeera* is playing a tremendous role in this regard. Some international presses can operate in the Muslim World, while others operate in London and other places. In this way, globalization can not only benefit Arab and Muslim populations but have an impact on Western perceptions of the Arab and Muslim World. It is not enough merely to critique the dangers of globalization. It is up to the Arabs and Muslims with both wealth and power to take the opportunities provided by globalization to further their views on a global level. So far, the Internet contributions of Arabs and Muslims are inferior to those of others. This is a major challenge.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Q: Is religion a major factor in designing U.S. foreign policy?

A: The overriding influences on U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab and Muslim World are what are perceived as "U.S. national interests," not religion. Primary interests are oil and the security and stability of Israel. Access to oil influences the development of relationships with Arab oil producing countries and other producers in the Muslim world. This brings into play the Palestinian issue and, therefore, relations with Arab and Muslim countries.

There is no doubt that religion has become a factor in the making of U.S. foreign policy, especially in the new concern for what is called "religious freedom" and "religious persecution." This is supposed to include all religions with regard to persecution. Pressure should be put on those who are responsible to make sure that it is global and that one is not simply identifying one religion, Islam, as the offender. One has to be frank about it. In a number of Muslim countries religious minorities are mistreated, but there are also human rights violations against Muslims and Christians in Israel and Muslims in China, and Muslims in the Southern Philippines. There is also oppression of mainstream Muslims within Muslim countries, e.g., Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt.

Q: In general, how would you classify the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world?

A: The relationship between the United States and the Muslim World is complex and one should not oversimplify it. The United States has maintained and will continue to maintain and seek to maintain a stable relationship with what it regards as its strategic partners. Strategic partners are often defined in terms of access to oil and in terms of stability within the Arab world and the Muslim world. It will deal with those countries that are willing to have a stable relationship with the state of Israel.

One of the critical questions that the United States continues to face is the attitude toward Islamic movements. While it seems to me that substantial statements made by assistant secretaries of state, like Edward Djerijian and Robert Pelletreau, have not matched policy actions taken by the U.S. government, for example, toward Tunisia and Algeria and even Egypt. As many of us have pointed out, the policy statements emphasize that the United States does not have a problem with the basically main stream Islamic movements that would participate within the system, but senior policy makers have been slow to identify or to name those main stream Muslim movements they would not have a problem with. In recent years, we have watched a number of Muslim governments move against not only extremists, which I believe they should, whether they are religious extremists or not, but against main stream opposition movements that have an Islamic profile. Too often the American government has been silent, and I think that raises substantial issues.

Q: The American-Iranian relationship has been a major issue on the agenda of both countries, as well as watched carefully by Muslims across the world. What kinds of policy steps need to be taken by both sides to resume their diplomatic and normal relationships? Why doesn't the United States respond positively to the messages and statements made by Khatami and Khurazi, as well as others? After all, why does the United States not respect the choice of the Iranian people and support the popularly elected president and his positive, constructive, and optimistic approach to the relationship between Iran and the West?

Why is the United States lagging far behind Europeans in improving its relationships with Iran? Do Israel and the Israeli lobby in Congress have anything to do with impeding an improvement in the relationships between the two countries? If this is the case, when do you think the United States would be able to formulate its own foreign policy based on its national interests and not the interests of Israel?

A: U.S.-Iranian relations are changing. Even though he does

not have the power that he would need, President Khatami has managed both within Iran and in terms of U.S. Iranian relations to set the discourse by pursuing such issues as civilizational dialogue. The U.S. government has become more aware of that. You have the Secretary of State talking about people to people diplomacy. On the other hand, one has continuing conflict between the State Department, and the CIA and FBI, on what Iranians should come to this country. The politicians in general are conservative and play it safe even in dealing with domestic issues. The issue of dealing with Iran was not on the front burner, during the election year 2000, but could come out of hibernation later.

The United States has attempted in a variety of ways to indicate its support for the direction that Mr. Khatami is taking, although it is a bit slow in taking concrete actions. There has been skepticism in the recent past because constitutionally he does not have the power. When one looks at the actual politics on the ground, one often sees the conservative forces blocking Khatami. Recent elections, however, have given Khatami a reformist majority in the Parliament. I think this will make people feel that there is a possibility and opportunity to move faster on reform.

Historically Israel and the Israeli lobby have attempted to impede progress with regard to Iran. I am not sure what position they will take now in light of the recent elections. Until now there has been an attempt simply not to make the needed distinctions concerning either Iran or the Islamic movements. Therefore, there has been an attempt to paint Iran simply as the threat to the region, rather than to talk about the diverse forces within Iran. Clearly, to the extent that Israel can emphasize the threat from Iran and Iraq and others, it enhances the notion that Israel needs stronger support. This is the framework of the whole issue of terrorism.

Q: The issue of terrorism has been a major factor in U.S. foreign policy. The United States has carried out military operations, held

conferences internationally, and enacted laws domestically to fight terrorism? What is the U.S. government's concept of terrorism? Are there any differences between acts of pure terrorism and resistance? For instance Hezbollah and Hamas contend that they are national liberation movements and are resisting occupation. Are they terrorist organizations?

A: Terrorism is a real issue. We have to be frank and clear about that. Terrorist groups do exist. They exist and operate all over the world, not just in the Arab and Muslim world. One can not underestimate what the bombing of the New York World Trade Center meant and the fear generated by subsequent convictions of those who were found guilty of plotting further bombings. This concern was exacerbated by the bombings in Tanzania and Kenya and of American quarters in Saudi Arabia and by statements by some people, like Usama Bin Laden, who say flat out that the United States should be a target of terrorism.

It gets complicated, however, when one begins to talk about distinguishing among actions. I go into this in the third edition of *The Islamic Threat*. Usually, in interviews I get nervous because limits of time prevent me from saying enough on this issue. In *Islamic Politics*, I cover the issue of Hamas and Hezbollah and terrorism in greater depth. What really gets difficult is distinguishing between terrorist groups and resistance groups. For example, if we look at Hezbollah, there were times when it engaged in aggressive actions that clearly could be seen as terrorist actions, but Hezbollah in recent years has shown that it operates within the Lebanese political system functioning as a major player in parliament. But when it comes to the south it has been primarily a resistance movement. This is different from some actions committed by Hezbollah and other groups during the civil war in Lebanon, but in recent years Hezbollah's actions in the south have been of a resistance movement. Hezbollah has made it clear that such actions would not exist if the Israelis would pull out of the south. Many outsiders refuse to see the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon as an

occupation and as illegal. Israel says it is in a defensive posture, but what does that mean in terms of international law? To what extent do we allow some countries to move into another country, which it sees as a threat, and to occupy that territory permanently? There has to be a way to resolve these issues internationally. Otherwise, some countries will attempt to legitimate their occupation of parts of other countries. This is as tricky as talking about preemptive strikes. The problem of such strikes is how do you legitimate who has the right to commit that preemptive strike. Why are some countries allowed to do this while others are not, and who does the legitimating here. Is it just the country taking the action? What does this mean in terms of international law?

The same issue would arise with regard to Hamas. One can't make a clear statement about Hamas. One has to distinguish between Hamas in general and the action of its military wing, and then one has also to talk about specific actions. Some actions by the military wing of Hamas can be seen as acts of resistance, but other actions are acts of retaliation, particularly when they target civilians. One cannot simply say that targeting of civilians is a response to an action by Mossad against civilians. Targeting civilians fits into fairly accepted definitions of terrorism. Other actions in the course of resistance are much more difficult to make a judgment on. We see the same problem, for example, when we look at Northern Ireland. Some actions of the IRA can be seen as taken as part of a civil war. These are actions of resistance, but there have also been actions by the IRA that clearly targeted civilians. When you take out civilians, one cannot simply dismiss this as an act of retaliation.

ARABS, MUSLIMS, AND AMERICA

Q: The perceptions and images of both sides are distorted. How can both sides correct such perceptions and have constructive relationships. Is the United States doing enough to improve its image across the Arab-Islamic world?

A: As I said earlier, if there is a danger of Orientalism, there is also the danger of Occidentalism. If there is a dangerous ignorance of Islam in the West, there is a danger of ignorance on the part of Muslims of what America is all about. I travel all the time throughout the Muslim world, and I find that there are as many ignorant stereotypes of the United States and the West as vice versa. In the West there are far more people, whether one agrees with them or not, who have taken the time to study Islam and Muslims than the reverse, and I think this becomes really important. Both sides have to be outspoken and critical, but they also have to be self-critical. Unless we do that, there will always be a problem. On concrete issues it is not enough for those of us who are non-Muslims to speak out. It is important, for example, that Muslims denounce terrorism when there is terrorism. If they don't, people ask how come we don't see Muslims step forward, and objective people reach conclusions.

I am Italian-American and in the old days it was Italians who were stereotyped in movies and in TV. We were the gangsters, and the Mafia, but is it the response of the Italian Americans to deny the existence of the Mafia or to deny that there is a Mafia that committed murders that could be crimes. Italian American denounced the actions of a small minority among them. The best solution is a sense of mutual respect that people gain from getting to know each other and understand each other, by being critical and also self critical. I find it really ironic that sometimes people who have chosen to live in America and are American citizens dismiss the whole system. I am not talking about criticizing the actions of officials, but about dismissing the entire system, for instance, using religious terms to say that "this is a Kuffar society" and therefore we should have nothing to do with the Kuffar and their legal system. If this is true, then there is no reason to live here, and there is also no reason to take American citizenship. I have encountered some Hizb al Tahrir in the United States and Europe who talk about this Kuffar society, and I made it clear that if this is really a

Kuffar society why don't you choose another Islamic society to study, work, and live in.

In the 21st century, there is an urgent need to join forces rather than continuing division. This is something I worry about. I sometimes worry more about the second and third generations. Sometimes I see them as poised to make the greatest contribution. Yet I see a minority element within the second and third generation that is unbelievably rejectionist and militant. I see it with some concern on many campuses today. There are tremendous divisions among Muslim students on campuses where you have competing Muslim student associations. These are serious issues that need to be addressed by the community.

THE UNITED STATES AND ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Q: The United States complains of its inability to work with Islamists because they are allegedly fundamentalist, while some Islamists look at the United States as the embodiment of evil? How can both sides make substantial efforts to understand each other? Frankly, Islamists believe that the United States intentionally does not want to put forth the effort?

A: Individual diplomats have made an attempt in the past in a number of countries to deal with Islamist movements, but they came under criticism for doing just that. Diplomats who have talked to the Ikhwan, or have talked with Hamas, or attempted to establish conversations with Hezbollah, have come under tremendous criticism. I think, unfortunately, the issue continues to be politicized when it comes to Islamic movements. I have insisted, in contrast to my colleagues with whom I disagree, such as Daniel Pipes and Robert Crane and others, that one has to distinguish between Islamist movements that are mainstream and those that are violently extremist. Western policy makers have to acknowledge the existence of mainstream movements and be willing to deal with them, and be as concerned about their rights to function within Muslim societies as they would be for secular

movements. On the other hand, I think it is very important that we acknowledge that extremist groups do exist and are a threat not only to the West but also within their own societies. The majority of people killed by extremists groups are Muslims within the Islamic world. There are times where American installations and embassy personnel get killed, but by and large those who get killed are Muslims.

One has to emphasize also the danger of some governments to their own people. I try to emphasize all the time that religious and secular authoritarianism, as well as secular and religious terrorism, are equally damnable. They exist and this ought to be acknowledged. Many people talk only about religious extremism, and ignore secular extremism. They talk about certain religious regimes, without talking about those regimes in the Muslim world that are equally authoritarian and engage in repression. One should be very concerned about the actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan. One should be concerned about governments that call themselves Islamic Republics and repress any and all opposition, not only religious minorities but also all those who disagree with them. But one also should be concerned about those governments in the Arab and Muslim world that are not setting themselves up as Islamic anything but who often are more authoritarian and repressive than any so-called Islamic regime when it comes to any and all opposition.

MUSLIMS AND THE AMERICAN ELECTIONS

Q: Muslims in America are in the process of crystallizing their political role. What kind of advice do you have for the Muslim community during this period? How can Muslims influence the U.S. election process? How do the presidential candidates address issues relevant to the Muslim community in America or related to the Muslim world? Which candidate best understands the problems of the Arab-Islamic world and would be willing to make significant changes in U.S. foreign policy toward a more positive approach and a balanced policy?

A: The 21st century is a time of enormous challenge and opportunity for Muslims in America. When I talked to Muslim groups twenty, thirty years ago, we used to talk about the need to develop a critical mass, the need to organize, and we are now very far along that road. There are still many problems. We don't have enough Arab and Muslim groups that are really strong. Too often Arab and Muslim groups are divided among themselves. Rather than having a number of strong groups, they begin to divide, compete, and fight among themselves. They fall into the category of what I call "professional Muslims." This is dangerous, because I think that, when you are a minority, unity is important. If you are a minority and divided you are doubly weak.

Secondly, Arabs and Muslims have not yet developed a culture of lobbying. If you want to be strong you will have to have organizations that are really strong to lobby for you, and then you will have to support them. Regrettably, many Arab and Muslim groups do not get the kind of financial support they need. They get it only when there is a major crisis and then that support recedes. Certainly many give to the causes they believe in, but there is still a problem. Some of the older generations come from countries where in fact they did not have freedoms to do these things. The culture did not allow these things. The institutions did not even exist, or if they did exist the state provided the funding.

With regard to the candidates, it is too soon to tell. I do not see the candidates addressing these issues. I would like to think Mr. Gore has learned something about Arab and Muslim leaders he has contacts with, and I would hope that is the case, but historically his voting record does not bring any optimism. One could say the same thing about the other candidates. In terms of George Bush, I have not seen him saying very much, but the Christian Right has a significant influence on Bush, which makes him problematic. □