

AUTHORITARIANISM AND LEGITIMACY: MOBILIZING ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The publication of the Mohammed caricatures in Denmark and other European countries and the ensuing violent protests in several Muslim countries have engendered a debate about the balance between freedom of speech and the need to avoid offending religious groups. Such a debate, by nature, is western-centric. It focuses on the vision that citizens of Western societies have about what values are desirable for their societies. Much less has been written from a perspective that puts the Middle East at the center of analysis. In most instances, it has been assumed that the (over)reaction in many Middle Eastern countries is simply a result of the offence caused by the cartoons, coupled with a misunderstanding of the liberal values that permit freedom to offend.

This conventional understanding of a “clash of civilizations” of sorts, I suggest, is overly reductionist and misses many of the nuances that characterize Middle Eastern societies and politics. Instead, I propose, we can better understand the riots by focusing on the behaviour of Middle Eastern regimes and their relationship with local societies. I argue that for many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East region, the cartoons provided an opportunity to buttress their shaky legitimacy by appearing before their domestic public as defenders of Islam, protecting it against imperialist aggression. Hence, these regimes had a vested interest in inflaming emotions, spreading rumours, and delivering subtle messages to the communities under their jurisdiction that, on this occasion, the costs to participants involved in the display of public protest would not be as high as they normally would be.

In what follows, I first assess the different ways of understanding the events surrounding the publication of the cartoons. I explain why a “clash of civilizations” approach does not provide useful tools to account for the violent protests that erupted in several Middle Eastern countries. I then proceed to provide an alternative explanation focusing on regime behaviour. The case of Syria is used for illustration, after which I return to general conclusions.

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Understanding the Mohammad Cartoons Affair

Analysis of the political events surrounding the publication of the cartoons can be conducted on three dimensions. First, there is the character of the cartoons themselves. Second, we can examine the popular claims made against their publication. Finally, the third dimension focuses on the overreaction in the streets of many Middle Eastern countries. The first two dimensions are intertwined, but it is the latter dimension that is essential to gaining a solid understanding of the politics that surround the cartoons affair.

Lest it be misunderstood, the insensitive nature of the cartoons should not be understated. Cartoons that portray the Muslim prophet wearing a turban shaped like a bomb are not only offensive, they also border on bigotry. Their underlying message is that the Muslim belief system as a whole is conducive to violence and suicide bombing, hence all followers of the Islamic faith are prone to violent behaviour in the name of their religion. In this respect, these types of messages resemble images of Jews as all-powerful and world-dominating (or at the very least, as capable of dictating American foreign policy).

Myths about, and essentialist assessment of, the so-called Muslim culture are not new. In academia too, for a very long time, scholarly work assumed the existence of some kind of cultural perversity in the Muslim Middle East. Violence, authoritarianism, and instability have too often been interpreted as reflections of cultural defects, the origins of which are to be found in religion. As a result, Middle Easterners have been portrayed as fundamentally unlike Westerners. That Europe of the twentieth century saw much more political violence, two world wars, genocides, and other large scale atrocities, escapes the attention of those who point to inherent attributes or a peculiar Islamic "mind-set", non-favourable to democratic, peaceful politics.¹

Ironically, culture-centric explanations seemingly get reinforced by the violent behaviour of the protestors coupled by claims made by many Islamists against the cartoons. After all, we do not see Jews burning British embassies around the world in response to cartoons published in British newspapers that depict the Star of David on a map of the United States (a reflection of the old myth about Jewish domination of the world). Nor did we see violent protests by world Jewry in response to the broadcasting of explicit anti-Semitic programming on Arab television.

Furthermore, many Islamists appeared in a variety of media outlets, explaining that the problem was not only with a particularly offensive cartoon, but that rather any representation of the Prophet, forbidden in Islam, should be avoided. Thus, the message conveyed is that the riots broke out in reaction to blasphemous

¹ One example, among several, of such scholarship is Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Washington, DC: Institute for Near East Policy, 1992).

behaviour. Aside from the dubious accuracy of these claims – Mohammad has been portrayed in the past (including in traditional Muslim art) without such repercussions – such demands essentially translate into requiring non-Muslims to conform to Muslim codes of conduct. This, in turn, reinforces fears that we are indeed in an era in which the spread of Islamic influence will threaten the liberal, Western way of life.

Both of these dimensions - the publication of the cartoons, on the one hand, and the substance of much of the criticism levelled against them - can be interpreted as providing proof of the incompatibility of Islam and western-liberal values. And yet, treating Islam as a singular, static concept misses the differentiation that exists in every society, every culture, and every religion. It was Samuel Huntington, the prestigious political scientist from Harvard accredited with formulating the clash of civilizations thesis, who maintained that Islam, like any religion, is complex, containing some elements favourable to democracy and others that are less so. The political salience of these features changes over time. But, more importantly, according to Huntington, contrary to conventional wisdom, Islam does not have a significant influence over attitudes towards politics.²

More recent survey research, conducted by Mark Tessler, confirms Huntington's argument. Tessler examined the actual causal connection between attitudes towards liberal democratic norms and practices relating to Islam in several Muslim countries, including Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and the Palestinian Territories. In the survey, the interviewees were asked about the importance of democratic governance, such as openness to diverse political ideas and opinions, holding regular free and fair elections, maintaining government accountability, and so on and so forth. In addition, the interviewees were asked about the degree to which they perform religious practices, such as prayer, observance, and other rituals. Finally, the survey targeted the interviewees' opinions on the desirability of political involvement of religious leaders and movements in public affairs as well as on the role Islam should play in political life. The project could not identify any relationship, positive or inverse, between religious devoutness and attitudes towards democracy. Thus, the results of the survey confirm that Islam has far less influence on political attitudes than is sometimes thought.³

Explaining the Violent Outrage – Authoritarianism and Legitimacy

Indeed, it appears that the dimensions that focus exclusively on the offensive character of the cartoons and the claims made against their publications, both of which characterize a culture-centric approach, are insufficient to account for the violent outrage that spread throughout the Middle East. An alternative explanation focuses on the interests of regimes in the Middle East. Of course, it could be argued

² Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave" (1991) 2:2 *Journal of Democracy* 12 at 28.

³ Mark Tessler, "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes Toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries" (2002) 34 *Comparative Politics* 337.

that these regimes reflect local values and attitudes. However, it should be remembered that the Middle Eastern regimes in question are among the most repressive and coercive in the world. It is precisely because they are not representative of their societies that Middle Eastern regimes are authoritarian. Their lack of legitimacy forces them to resort to coercion. Otherwise, they would have to face challenges from alternative rule-makers who are more representative of local preferences.

Many regimes in the Middle Eastern region have found it useful to appeal to Islamist sentiments in order to bolster their legitimacy in the eyes of their population. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 1970s, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made public show of his piety. Sadat lacked the charisma and heroic background of his predecessor, Gamal abd-al Nasser. Whereas Nasser could rely on his image and history as the leader of Arab nationalism in the struggle against European and American imperialism, Sadat had to look for other sources of legitimacy. Facing criticism from left-wing student organizations for what they perceived as the regime's divergence from the socialist ideals of the 1952 Officers' Coup, Sadat sought to weaken his critics by allowing Islamists to operate alternative associations as a counter force. This was a divide-and-rule strategy of sorts. Trying to build an alliance with religious elements in society, Sadat promoted programming with Islamic content in the media and the education system. He expanded government support of official religious institutions, and he used Islamic themes to justify his policies. That he was eventually accused by Islamists of not going far enough with his commitment is evidence of the unintended consequences of his policy. He was unable to contain the forces he had initially unleashed to strengthen his claim for political authority.

In Iraq too, the secular regime of Saddam Hussein frequently manipulated religious themes. Most notable is the reference to an historic Arab-Muslim battle against the Persians, used to mobilize the population for the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s. Controlling the public discourse, the regime labelled this war as *Qadisiyyat - Sadam*. The original battle at al-Qadisiyya, which took place in the year 637 AD, saw the Arabs bring about the collapse of the Persians' dynasty, enabling the spread of Islam eastwards. Hence, the battle was endowed with religious significance. Given that the majority of Iraqis, like the Iranians, are Shi'ite and Saddam was from the minority Sunni sect, and given that the regime's official ideology was socialist-secular, there was a real threat that support for the war amongst the Shi'ite population in Iraq would be minimal. Therefore, the regime resorted to appealing to collective historical memory, which carries emotional baggage of religious significance, in order to mobilize the population and enhance the legitimacy of the war.

The Case of Syria

As in Iraq, the Syrian state is controlled by a small, sectarian minority. However, the Alawi rule has been facing even greater obstacles to its legitimacy because many Islamists, particularly Sunnis, question the authenticity of Alawi Islamism. Indeed, a

long history of animosity, and sometimes isolation and persecution, has created two distinct identity groups in Syria. Members of the Alawi minority, constituting approximately 11 percent of the population, have been controlling the regime since the late 1960s. In turn, many in the Sunni community, composing approximately 75 percent of the population, feel alienated.

Since its emergence, the Alawi-dominated regime has perceived Sunni Islamists as the greatest threat to its stability. To consolidate its authority, the regime has been relying on a hybrid strategy of brutal, penetrative coercion and other mechanisms to increase its legitimacy. In particular, the ruling echelon has taken steps to blur sectarian differentiation by fostering an Islamic-friendly image.

The initial cleavage between the two sects can be traced back to the ninth century when the Alawis split away from the Shi'ite tradition of Islam. Many devout Sunnis and Shi'ites do not recognize Alawi doctrine and practices as Islamic and consider the sect heretical. From the outset, tension characterized relations between Sunnis and Alawis. Due to persecution, Alawis retreated to rural and mountainous areas near the western coast of Syria, where, for centuries, they were able to live out of mainstream reach. Alawi subordination and isolation intensified under the rule of the Ottoman Empire when local Sunni elites were incorporated into the administrative apparatus. Furthermore, the official religion of the Empire was Sunni Islam, and although the Ottoman system gave some autonomy to non-Muslim communities to handle their own cultural and religious affairs, the Alawis were not granted official status. Thus they were governed directly by the Sunni judicial and executive system, but were treated as inferior and subjected to special taxes, physical harassment, and social discrimination. The extent of retreat and isolation was such that by 1920, the year in which the French received a mandate from the League of Nations to rule Syria, only 700 of about 175,000 Alawis lived in towns.⁴ Indeed, Richard Antoun suggests that the term "Alawi" carries the meaning of "a territory, a politico-economic system, a wide ranging cultural repertoire, and a history."⁵

Power relations changed when the French took over. Typical divide-and-rule tactics and minority-favouring policies translated into significant social and political gains for the Alawis. For a short while, the French even granted the Alawis an autonomous state in the region where they were concentrated. Furthermore, whereas national sentiments were rising amongst the Sunni Syrians, Alawis, recruited by the French into the security apparatus, were mostly responsible for suppressing Sunni-led uprisings. Hence, on the one hand, Sunni resentment toward Alawis increased during the colonial period as the latter were perceived as

⁴ Oded Haklai, "A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority: The Case of Syria" (2000) 6:3 *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 19 at 31.

⁵ Richard T. Antoun, "Ethnicity, Clientship, and Class: Their Changing Meaning" in Richard T. Antoun & Donald Quataert, eds., *Syria: Society, Culture and Polity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) at 10.

collaborators. On the other hand, French policies also helped transition Alawi society away from its traditional peasant and rural social characteristics.

Ultimately, the legacies of French colonialism included mutual Alawi-Sunni resentment coupled with an Alawi-dominated military. Political instability throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, a series of coups, and an alliance between the Ba'th Party and the military eventually led to a 1966 coup from which point Alawis began to dominate Syrian politics. The Ba'th party, formed in 1953 by Akram Hourani, a socialist Sunni, and Michel Aflaq, a Christian intellectual educated in France, espoused an ideology that embraced pan-Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism. As such, it was attractive to the Alawi minority. It was one of the very few channels for Alawis to express their political preferences. To a large extent, there was an overlap between the military and the party, as a close alliance was formed and key personnel in the military also had influence in the party.

With such a history, it is easy to understand why the regime would seek ways to increase the bases of its legitimacy. Indeed, it is against this background that the behaviour of the contemporary Syrian regime needs to be analyzed. Stability was largely attained through the informal military-Ba'th pact. The regime employed the most coercive measures to defeat potential challengers to its authority. In addition, an expansive and controlling bureaucracy has been established to penetrate society and minimize any public space autonomous of the Syrian state. Nonetheless, even the most coercive of authoritarian regimes needs to establish a support base that will provide some legitimacy to its rule, all the more so in the context of inter-sectarian hostilities with a long history of conflict. One of the means the regime has been employing to strengthen its legitimacy is blurring the internal religious differentiation. The Alawi regime has been portraying itself as friendly toward Islam.

This has not always been the case. Initially, committed to its secular ideological underpinnings, the Ba'th regime attempted to introduce a constitution that separates religion and state. Sunnis, in turn, received this move with great anxiety and countered with street protests, leading the regime to change its plan and amend its constitution. Nonetheless, conditions were conducive to the rise of the radical Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. As the Islamists were gaining in popularity, the regime realized that it could no longer rely exclusively on coercion and so had to demonstrate its commitment to religion. In particular, the regime was shaken by the attempted assassination of President Hafez al-Asad in 1980 and the brutal suppression of the Islamist rebellion in Hamah, resulting in the massacre of tens of thousands of Brotherhood supporters. Following the Hamah revolt, the ruling apparatus began to publicly demonstrate its religious devoutness. The regime invested in new mosques, and public television began to regularly cover the President's participation in prayer service.

Extensive coercion, coupled with strategies of legitimacy, facilitated regime sustainability for a very long time. However, following the death of Asad after thirty years of rule, and the coronation of his son, Bashar, questions regarding the stability of the regime began to be raised. Fears that external powers could dictate changes to

the Syrian regime grew after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The loss of Lebanon further ignited scepticism regarding Bashar's ability to control his subordinates and simultaneously protect Syria's interest. With its open economy and entrepreneurial opportunities, Lebanon was an enormous financial asset to the Syrians. The impact of its loss cannot be overstated.

With these developments in the background, the cartoons provided an indispensable opportunity for the regime to bolster its status by demonstrating to the domestic population both its commitment to Islam and its ability to stand up to western powers. The regime did so, together with other Middle Eastern governments, by facilitating the spread of inaccurate rumours with regards to the content of the cartoons. At the same time, the regime communicated to the populace that protesting the cartoons would not be punished in the same way that street protests normally are in Syria.

When discussing a top-down interpretation of violent street protests, it should be kept in mind that most of the protestors do not have access to online or European newspapers, and had never actually seen the cartoons in question. Indeed, it was a group of Danish imams who travelled to the Middle East to present representatives of local regimes with a folder, containing the published cartoons. The folder, however, also contained other, more offensive images of Mohammed with a pig snout, Mohammed as a pedophile, and a Muslim being subjected to anal sex by a dog while engaged in prayer.

Whether Middle Eastern governments were aware that these depictions were unpublished is not important. The more significant point is that they were the only major actors in the Middle East with any information to begin with. And as such, they presented the affair to their publics as a Western attack on Islam, reinforcing fears that Islam is being threatened by the powerful western aggressors. In an elaborate study of ethnicity-related violence, Donald Horowitz has observed that

[r]umors form an essential part of the riot process. They justify the violence that is about to occur. Their severity is often an indicator of the severity of the impending violence. Rumors narrow the options that seem available to those who join crowds and commit them to a line of action. They mobilize ordinary people to do what they would not ordinarily do. ... They project onto the future victims of violence the very impulses entertained by those who will victimize them. They confirm the strength and danger presented by the target group, thus facilitating violence born of fear. Rumors, then, are not stray tales.⁶

⁶ Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) at 74-75.

The recalling of ambassadors and calls to punish the Danes and their European supporters, boycott Danish products, and take other punitive measures, not only against the publishing newspaper, but against the West as a whole, came from the top down. They fed into fears of Western aggression and served the political needs of the Syrian regime, as well as many other regimes in the Middle Eastern region. In doing so, however, they also legitimized violent riots. Those who were engaged in the violence were of the conviction that they were acting in defence of Islam. That is the message they got from the ruling echelon. The domino effect then also caused the riots to spread to other countries in which no such similar interest existed.

Conclusion

The goals of the analysis presented here are two-fold. First, the focus is shifted away from a Western-centric debate to a perspective that focuses on Middle Eastern politics. Second, the discussion counters a prevailing trend, adopted by many commentators, viewing the Mohammed cartoons furor as a clash of civilizations of sorts. Interpreting the cartoon affair as a battle featuring the freedom of speech versus Muslim sensitivities is evidently insufficient for explaining the violent riots that spread throughout many Muslim countries. Rather, I suggest that the domestic politics in many Middle Eastern countries are such that the cartoons presented regimes, Syria serving as a prime example, with opportunities to strengthen their legitimacy. Domestic leaders could demonstrate commitment to Islam and concomitant capacity to counter perceived Western aggression. The riots, therefore, occurred because they served the interests of some regimes.



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