Iraq and the Future of Political Islam

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Sixty-five years ago one of the greatest scholars of modern Islam asked the simple question, “whither Islam?”, where was the Islamic world going? It was a time of intense turmoil in both the Western and Muslim worlds – the demise of imperialism and crystallisation of a new state system outside Europe; the creation and testing of the neo-Wilsonian world order in the League of Nations; the emergence of European Fascism. Sir Hamilton Gibb recognised that Muslim societies, unable to avoid such world trends, were also faced with the equally inescapable penetration of nationalism, secularism, and Westernisation. While he prudently warned against making predictions – hazards for all of us interested in Middle Eastern and Islamic politics – he felt sure of two things: (a) the Islamic world would move between the ideal of solidarity and the realities of division; (b) the key to the future lay in leadership, or who speaks authoritatively for Islam. Today Gibb’s prognostications may well have renewed relevance as we face a deepening crisis over Iraq, the unfolding of an expansive and controversial war on terror, and the continuing Palestinian problem.

In this lecture I would like to look at the factors that may affect the course of Muslim politics in the present period and near-term future. Although the points I will raise are likely to have broader relevance, I will draw mainly on the case of the Arab world.

Assumptions about Political Islam

There is no lack of predictions when it comes to a politicised Islam or Islamism. ‘Islamism’ is best understood as a sense that something has gone wrong with contemporary Muslim societies and that the solution must lie in a range of political action. Often used interchangeably with ‘fundamentalism’, Islamism is better equated with ‘political Islam’. Several commentators have proclaimed its demise and the advent

of the *post*-Islamist era. They argue that the repressive apparatus of the state has proven more durable than the Islamic opposition and that the ideological incoherence of the Islamists has made them unsuitable to modern political competition. The events of September 11th seemed to contradict this prediction, yet, unshaken, they have argued that such spectacular, virtually anarchic acts only prove the bankruptcy of Islamist ideas and suggest that the radicals have abandoned any real hope of seizing power.

The contrary view points to a kind of Islamist proliferation in our age. Rather than waning or becoming less significant, Islamist groups are growing in size, reach, and power. This is the contemporary version of earlier fears of the 'revolt of Islam', fears that arose in the late 19th century as the Ottoman empire declined, in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the wake of the abolition of the caliphate, and the late 1970s and early 1980s in reaction to the Iranian revolution. Today, this school of thought inverts the argument of the school that says political Islam has been a failure and that we are in the post-Islamist period. This second school argues, rather, that because the state in the Middle East generally lacks legitimacy and because the alternative strategy of Islamism is attractively uncomplicated, Islamist groups are gaining in popularity and influence.

Policy-makers in the Western capitals have adopted the concerns of the second school of thought and have, as we know, launched a far-flung war on terrorism. Indeed, the near-universal view, among policy-makers, academics, and the media, after the unsettling events of Autumn 2001 was that, rather than being out of the woods and self-congratulatory, we need to recognise that we are facing a virulent and more dangerous form of Islamic radicalism than has hitherto been seen. The official formulations of this problem in Washington but, to a certain extent, in London as well have not been as simplistic as sometimes portrayed. Critics of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair have been quick to see in their policy hints of new Crusades or that war between Islam and the West is inevitable. In fairness, their thinking has been somewhat more nuanced than the starkly defined fears and criticisms would have it, yet ultimately their thinking has also been distorting. There are four assumptions in the official worldview:

First, it is argued, a distinction should be made between moderate Muslims and radical Islamists. More subtle than sometimes acknowledged, this premise argues that there exists a range of opinion in modern Islam. Speaking of those who engage in what he calls a "terror offensive", President Bush has said, "Some call this evil Islamic radicalism; others, militant Jihadism; and still others, Islamo-fascism. Whatever it is called, this ideology is very different from the religion of Islam." Prime Minister Blair has very strongly distinguished Islam the religion from Islamic terrorism and spoken warmly of the former: "To me, the most remarkable things about the Koran I how progressive it is…[It] is a reforming book… inclusive.. extol[ling] science and knowledge. It is practical and far ahead of its time in attitudes towards marriage, women and government." The radicals are the obvious danger, by way of contrast, and must be dealt with decisively; moderate Muslims can and should be enlisted in this anti-radical campaign.

Second, while adverse social conditions account in part, for the rise of radicalism, the main driving force is ideology. Radical Islam, in the words of President Bush, "thrives, like a parasite, on the suffering and frustration of others" and a "culture of victimization". But what really matters is that these radicals follow a "clear and focused ideology – a set of beliefs and goals that are evil, but not insane". These evil tenets, importantly, are "inalterable" and "totalitarian", in the words of Prime Minister Blair, "fanatical".

Third, the radicals constitute an "empire of terror" – "borderless" in form, "global" in its reach. Al-Qa'ida in particular forms a seamless network, reaching outwards in shadowy ways, encompassing vast portions of the Muslim world and many groups. Prime Minister Blair, writing in *Foreign Affairs,* was explicit about the interconnections:

> The struggle against terrorism in Madrid, or London, or Paris is the same as the struggle against the terrorist acts of Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, or rejectionist groups in Iraq. The murder of the innocent in Beslan is part of the same ideology that takes innocent lives in Libya, Saudi Arabia, or Yemen.

> And when Iran gives support to such terrorism, it becomes part of the same battle, with the same ideology at its heart.

Fourth, Iraq is the "central front" of the war on terrorism. Connections existed between Saddam's regime and Bin Ladin, and today al-Qa'ida operates with impunity and is the driving force behind Sunni sectarian violence.

These assumptions – Islamic differentiation, the dominance of ideology, the existence of a broad-based network, and the pivotal importance of Iraq – are based on long and hard thinking in the foreign policy bureaucracies of the great powers, and occupy the considerable attention of academics as well. There is some sense to each, but they are also problematic. To take each in turn:

1. The search for a distinction between moderate Muslims and radical Islamists is certainly understandable and, naturally, there is nothing wrong with distinguishing a great religion from violence issued in its name. We can also appreciate the value this distinction would have when one is trying to appeal to Muslim audiences, as the leaders of the United States and United Kingdom are. It has long ago become axiomatic both that Islam does not constitute a monolith, and that the vast majority of Muslims around the world reject violence as the preferred approach to politics. Statesmen who make these points are thus following a growing consensus.

The problem for analysis lies, however, in how we envision the Islamist side: 'radical' and 'Islamist' tend to become conflated, and Islamism emerges as undifferentiated. As this occurs, critical distinctions have become blurred, and something tantamount to an Islamist monolith, or at least a slippery slope of Islamism, has powerfully emerged as the prism through which a complex political terrain is viewed. But such a prism is distorting. Simply put, al-Qa'ida's approach to violence and its black-and-white worldview are markedly different from those of other groups such as Hamas, Hizbullah, and the various manifestations of the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, regardless of the rhetorical concession that separates good Muslims from bad Islamists, these differences are overlooked in fact.

The United States has placed Hizbullah on the list of terrorist organisations, called it “dangerous” and blamed it for the instability of Lebanon, despite the fact that it represents a considerable portion of the Shi’a – a plurality of Lebanese citizens – and has effectively participated in the Parliament and Cabinet. President Bush assigned Hamas, which won a majority in the Palestinian elections of January 2006, to “the camp of terror” and the State Department lists it as a “Foreign Terrorist Organisation”. Its story is more complex, however. While it has engaged in or supported violence against Israelis, it also denounced the events of September 11th. A number of Islamist leaders immediately declared that they were “appalled by yesterday’s killings, explosions, destruction, and attacks on innocent civilians” and they “denounce[d] very firmly and strongly these incidents that contravene all human and Islamic values”. Among the signatories was the spiritual head of Hamas, Shaykh Ahmad Yasin.

My point is not to whitewash or exonerate these groups. It is, however, to suggest that while substantial differences exist among Islamist groups, current policy by and large does not recognise them. In fact, it may, in the end, come close to arguing that a slippery slope exists whereby there is really no such thing as moderate Islamism, or that Islamists inevitably mutate into radicals.

2. *The matter of ideology*: Scholars have debated what the roots of Islamism are. Although Tony Blair has said that “it is rubbish to suggest Islamist terrorism is the product of poverty”, the most satisfying explanation is one that acknowledges the importance of structural and ideological factors. Among the former, structural ones are economic deprivation, political closure or repression, and social inequalities. People, in other words, may well have concrete reasons to protest against and to oppose the status quo. But, of course, it is the case that not all the discontented turn to violence, or express their protest in terms that invoke God. Ideas and beliefs do play an important role, and any reasonable analysis must bring ideology back in as an explanatory factor. But it matters how we view it.

Ideas and beliefs are not monolithic or homogeneous; they are made up of a variety of strands of thought and multiple interpretations. Moreover, they change over time. Ideas concerning, for example, nationalism, popular participation, and social justice –or, for that matter, the nature of the state and jihad – are not stagnant, and Qur'anic meanings are often ambiguous. Even in societies as conservative as Saudi Arabia, reform has been possible, and contrary to what may have been expected, ideas of popular sovereignty now coexist with the concept of divine sovereignty in the political thought of Muslims in modern-day Iran. In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, Hamas in Palestine, Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Islamic movements in Morocco and Algeria, and others, we find a flexibility of ideology that does not fit the stereotype of the unbending 'true believer'. Jihadist ideas are still very much part of the intellectual milieu, but most Islamist movements are neither simply jihadist nor unequivocally democratic. There is a mixture of evolving viewpoints that belies the official, static picture of 'evil' and 'totalitarian' mindsets.

3. *Global networks*: There is no doubt that terrorism, or for that matter, Islamism has transnational dimensions today. Borders, in a globalised world, are increasingly notional, and Islamist groups and ideas reach across the internal frontiers of the Muslim world and have an impact, sometimes tragically as we know, even in the traditionally non-Muslim world – in New York and Washington, Madrid, and London. But it is one thing to speak of broad appeal and reinforcing movements; another thing to speak of an empire of terror that links various groups to each other and has a similar source of inspiration. We speak now of al-Qa'ida as if it constitutes the central headquarters of political Islam, just as we once spoke, in an evocation of the Comintern, of Iran as the 'Khomeini-tern' of radical Islam. The specific circumstances of movements need to be taken into account.

Nowhere is this better seen than in the cases of Hamas and Hizbullah. Hamas is pursuing an Islamist agenda, but is naturally affected by the particular circumstances of Israeli occupation, economic boycott, competition with the secular Palestine Liberation Organisation, and the corruption of local elites. For all the talk of religious concepts in its basic covenant, one cannot make sense of Hamas unless it is seen, above all, as part of

the Palestinian national struggle. For its part, Hizbullah has gained strength in the circumstances of Israeli occupation of parts of southern Lebanon, the support of Iran and Syria, competition with other sectarian groups, and the engrained weakness of the Lebanese state. The globality of Islamism, even radical Islamism, is convenient shorthand for its broad appeal, but it can be misleading if it understates the particularity of movements and groups and, therefore, the differences in their political agendas.

4. *Iraq:* In a curious and not entirely consistent way, the official discourse of Washington and London acknowledges the importance of at least one local circumstance when it singles out Iraq as the central battlefield in the war against terror. The first attempt at linkage was, to put it mildly, clumsy. President Bush argued in October 2002, prior to the invasion of March 2003, that Iraq and al-Qa'ida had had contacts for "a decade" and that Iraq had trained al-Qa'ida members "in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases". We now know that part of the American intelligence community vigorously disagreed with these assertions and they soon disappeared from official justifications for the war.

More recently, the attempt to tie Iraq to Islamic radicalism has taken two, inter-connected forms: al-Qai'da is using Iraq as a base of operations and is stimulating sectarian violence there; what happens in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan will affect the course of political Islam throughout the world. Let me now turn to a more specific consideration of the Iraqi dimension.

Iraq and Islamic Radicalism

Both the American and British administrations have predicted that the Iraqi war will lead to a reduction in Islamist violence throughout the world. Their main logic appears to be that radicals would be lured to Iraq and defeated there. President Bush said in November 2005, "If we were not fighting and destroying this enemy in Iraq, they would not be idle. They would be plotting and killing Americans across the world and within our own borders. By fighting these terrorists in Iraq, Americans in uniform are defeating a direct threat to the American people."

The two governments appear, however, to be out of tune with their own intelligence agencies. The official investigation of the London bombings of July 2005 reported that the heads of MI5 and MI6 had "emphasized … the growing scale of the Islamist terrorist threat". The National Intelligence Estimate of 2006, the most important annual American intelligence report, pointed to the war as a factor in the 'metastasizing" of global jihadism. An independent American study group, the Council on Global Terrorism, stated last year, "there is every sign that radicalization in the Muslim world is spreading rather than shrinking." Academic critics argue that, in failing to pursue al-Qai'da after the fall of the Taliban rather than invading Iraq, the United States allowed al-Qa'ida to establish itself firmly in the lawless regions of Pakistan and in western Iraq. It enhanced its popularity, moreover, not only among the ranks of Palestinians, distressed at the continuing stalemate of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and young Saudis or Egyptians, among others, disenchanted with regimes that appear to them as corrupt and excessively pro-Western; but also among the disaffected young Muslims of western Europe, America, and perhaps Australia. One thinks of the great Arab poet, Adonis, who spoke of the "kingdom of the bewildered rock": "We die unless we create the gods/We die unless we murder the gods".

An important part of the argument has to do with the encouragement of sectarianism, in Iraq and elsewhere. Confessional animosity has existed throughout Islamic history; one twelfth century anti-Shi'ite tract, for instance, was entitled *Talbis Iblis* (The Devil's Deception). But today we are faced daily with horrifying pictures of not only Iraqis blowing up Westerners, but also of Sunnis fighting Shi'a. There is no doubt that al-Qa'ida is responsible in significant part for such actions. The fetid anti-Shi'i diatribes of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qa'ida in Iraq until his death, make this point abundantly clear. So too do the actions of his group. It bombed Shi'i holy sites in Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala, and in February 2006, destroyed the Golden Mosque in Samarra. It proclaimed, unrealistically, the Islamic State of Iraq in the Sunni, and geographically non-contiguous, areas of Baghdad, Mosul and Anbar Province. In characteristically evocative language, it proclaims its opposition to both the Crusaders – Western forces – and the "Safavids" – a dynastic reference to Iran. It is not surprising that some Shi'a have responded in kind. Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi,

constitutes one important group, although its force is generally trained against the American-British occupation.

One scholar, Vali Nasr, has argued that sectarianism is now the defining characteristic of Islam. In his view, the tensions we see in Iraq have their analogues in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. With Iraq the first Shi'i Arab state, a new Cold War may be unfolding – one, this time, not between the radical Arab nationalists and the pan-Islamists, such as characterised the competition between Nasser's Egypt and the Saudi Arabia of King Faysal in the late 1950s and 1960s, but rather between the Sunni Arabs and the Shi'i Arabs. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia are the state representatives of the former; Iraq and Lebanon, principally, of the latter. The initial reactions of the three Sunni states to Hizbullah's missile attacks on Israel in 2006 provide some support for this point of view. They all denounced Hizbullah for its "adventurism" and dragging the region into a dangerous war, although, it must be said, they changed their position once they discerned that their populations were behind Hizbullah's 'heroic' struggle.

Iran is the peg on which regional order hangs. For the Sunni states, it is destabilising: in their view, Iran encouraged the Lebanese crisis of last year, and as President Mubarak caustically remarked, the Arab Shi'a appear more loyal to Iran than to their own countries. With regard to Iraq, the border between Iran and southern Iraq scarcely exists, virtually all Iraqi Shi'i leaders owe their current positions of influence to Iranian assistance, millions of Iranians have gone into Iraq as pilgrims, and the Revolutionary Guards operate with impunity on Iraqi soil. A nuclearised Iran would be even more alarming and dangerous. For the Shi'a, on the other hand, Iran provides an integrated, and welcome, support structure of religious learning, financial aid, military training, and political protection. Sunni alarmists fear a Shi'i arc of crisis – what Jordan's King 'Abdullah has called the "Shi'i crescent" – whereas Shi'i chauvinists hope for trans-local, sectarian solidarity, a kind of particularised pan-Islam. The scenarios for the future may thus appear distinctly worrying.

But at the risk of underplaying the difficulties, I would suggest that the general factors outlined earlier help to put the matter into perspective. In brief form:

Differentiation: Just as there is no Islamic monolith or Islamist monolith, there is no Sunni or, perhaps more importantly, Shi'i undifferentiated whole. 'Sunnism' and 'Shi'ism' constitute constructed and politicised categories, and much is made to fit into them. To take just the example of the Iraqi Shi'a, there are those loyal to Ayatuallah Sistani and the religious educational complex known as the *hawza*; Sadrists are less compromising and are intermittent supporters of the current Iraqi government, and while all are anti-American, they have divided among themselves on the attitude towards Iran; the Islamic Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) work within the present regime but remain competitors. There are Shi'i nationalists who, however, have different views on whether the Iraqi state should be unitary or federal; and there are Shi'i regionalists, some of whom promote the primacy of Basra over the central region, and others who call for regional separatism. Despite the comforting ideal of solidarity, then, the reality of fragmentation and difference undermines notions of a simple Sunni-Shi'i divide.

Ideology: As we have seen, the idea of a rigid and uniform ideology behind Islamism is questionable. In the case of the Iraqi Shi'a, as I have said, all factions have been dependent on Iranian help in some way. This does not, however, mean that they are all followers of Iranian ideology. Grand Ayatullah Sistani does not accept the Khomeinist interpretation of governance, and his circle espouses a less direct intervention in politics than other Shi'i leaders who are more sympathetic to views emanating from the Iranian spiritual centre of Qum. In addition, each has had to come to terms with, and in effect improvise positions on, ideas such as elections, the organisation of a multi-ethnic state, and cooperation with or resistance to occupiers during a civil war, issues which lack established traditions on which they could automatically rely for guidance.

Regardless of whether ideology evolves in these circumstances, it may not even be the key factor at work. A simple point is often overlooked: the various Islamist actors – leaders with established followers and organised groups – are political actors above all,

seeking power and influence. This dynamic may explain intra- and cross- sectarian conflict, or conversely may induce forms of tactical bargaining among them. However identified as Sunni or Shi'i, or Shi'i of a particular kind, political actors are not necessarily preconditioned to a particular course of action.

'Global' or Specific: Another general assumption we encountered earlier was the interconnectedness of Islamist movements. Some argue that there is a global network; many others would acknowledge the importance of transnational ties. There is no doubt that both Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq are connected to outside groups. But the extent to which a 'global' Shi'ism exists is debatable. Despite the supposed commonalities, Shi'i groups differ according to national or local circumstances. Hizbullah in Lebanon, and Da'wa and SCIRI in Iraq, have more common interests with other parties in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively, than with each other. Partly for the reason I mentioned about ideological differences, the linkage with Iran is also less of a trans-Shi'i commonality than one might think. Added to this is the suspicion in many Shi'i quarters outside Iran that Iranian Shi'ism is little more than a projection of Iranian state power. Why, the reasoning goes here, should we defer to a supposed Shi'i Vatican when it is really only a modern projection of Persian hegemony? Moreover, emerging anthropological studies are documenting a kind of localisation of ritual whereby significant differences in the observance of Muharram – a central commemoration of the Shi'i calendar – are developing in southern Lebanon, southern Iraq, and Iran. Rather than pan-Shi'ism, then, we may be witnessing the development of nationalised Shi'isms.

Looking to the Future

It would doubtless be rash, by way of conclusion, to make predictions. As Churchill is reputed to have said, "it is much better to prophesy after the event has taken place". But, having foolishly put the "future of political Islam" in the title to this talk, let me offer a few general, and I believe fairly safe, observations. First, the Iraqi crisis, in continuing to pose a profound challenge to regional stability, will empower sub-national groups of all kinds, including Islamist ones. The unity of Iraq has been declining since the 1990s in the wake of the first Gulf war, and is now largely fictional. The occupiers,

intent on regime change but mired in nation-building, appear to have no idea of either how to remedy the situation or how to exit. In this environment, the immediate prospects for democratisation – the assumed corollary of invasion – are dim. With neither the restraining iron fist of Saddam, nor ordered give-and-take bargaining, the proliferation of Islamic groups of various kinds enhances the possibilities of radicalisation. In a market metaphor, the price is bid upwards.

Second, one of the two 'winners', if winning is the appropriate word, will of course be Iran. (The other is Israel.) Iran has aspirations that are both regionally assertive and, given the perception that it is encircled by the United States and its allies, defensive. It has close links with prominent non-state actors such as Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Shi'i parties of Iraq. It has the economic and military power to influence events well beyond its borders, and both the political will and ideological rationale to do so. As Amin Saikal has pointed out, Iran has gained a greater geopolitical importance today: an Iranian-Syrian axis lies at the centre of what he calls a "Shi'a strategic entity" stretching from western Afghanistan to Lebanon. This means that no solution to the present Iraqi conflict can be reached without direct engagement, above all, with Iran, but also with its allies – Syria and the local actors, the 'insurgents'.

Third, however alarming the prior two points may seem, prognostications about a great Sunni-Shi'i divide in the Middle East are almost certainly overstated. Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has recently offered a cogent view of an emergent "New Middle East" in which "tensions between Sunnis and Shiites will grow … causing problems in countries with divided societies such as Bahrain, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia". There is no doubt that sectarianism has become more pronounced. A distinctive feature of the modern landscape is in fact an accentuation of difference: the pronouncing of excommunication on fellow Muslims, for example, but also the self- and cross-identification of Muslims as Salafis, Shi'a, Wahhabis, Sufis, and the many variations on these identities. Salafi tracts, purportedly aimed at the ritual practice of the faith, often denounce Shi'i practices as deviations in such emotive terms that the sense of the *umma*, the community of faith, seems to vanish into the ether.

But, in a sense, we have been here before – in the 1980s when Sunni-dominated Iraq and revolutionary Iran were locked in mortal combat for eight very bloody years. The fears of similar uprisings and instability were not realised by and large, and for two broad reasons: the entrenched power of states in the region, with their abilities both to co-opt and to repress; and intra-sectarian divisions. In addition, there is often an express political purpose to the downplaying of sectarianism. One would normally think of al-Qa'ida as assertively Sunni in inspiration and, obversely, the Iranian revolutionary state as assertively Shi'i. While this is certainly true, it is also the case that both have approved of the struggles of Muslims beyond their sectarian patch. Bin Ladin and his lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, endorse the jihad of Hizbullah and depict it in broadly Islamic terms as defence against Zionist and imperialist aggression, which endangers the *umma* as a whole. In a similar manner, the Iranian establishment applauds the activities of Sunni Hamas and has become its biggest financial backer since the election of January 2006.

At the risk of seeming complacency, and putting it crassly, politics will trump religion – or perhaps, somewhat more precisely, state power will trump religious politics. And, as Sir Hamilton Gibb whom I cited at the outset predicted, no matter how attractive the idea of the broader unity of faith, it is checked by the reality of division and fragmentation.

There is a final, broader point that ought to be made. I have been speaking about the specific impact of the Iraqi war and the war on terrorism, and thus leaving the impression perhaps of a conflict-prone Islamic world. Some, as we have seen, regard Islamism as inevitably 'radical', 'militant' or 'jihadist', hostile to the West and our way of life. Prime Minister Blair has argued against the idea of engrained civilisational antipathy: "For this ideology [of militant Islam], we are the enemy. But 'we' are not the West. 'We' are as much Muslim as Christian, Jew, or Hindu. 'We' are all those who believe in religious tolerance, in openness to others, in democracy, in liberty, and in human rights administered by secular courts." To my hearing, this depiction of the values under attack seems, nevertheless, culturally encoded.

But, whether we see Islam through the filter of Western values or not, a critical question looms: can there be evolution of thought and practice among those Muslims who are expressly committed to political action? One way of looking at this is to assume that rigidity or perhaps incoherence renders Islamism incapable of real development; it is, therefore, destined to fail. Another possibility, however, is that the very ambiguity of Islamist thought, in addition to providing the operational advantage of attracting a broad constituency, allows for space for the flexible development of talismanic ideas like the 'Islamic state'. If this view is taken, then, far from being in decline, Islamism is capable of adaptation and growth. We have examples, from Egypt to Palestine and Lebanon, from Morocco to Iran, of pluralist and participatory ideas emerging and multiple voices being heard. If not exactly democratic or singing from the same hymn sheet, these contribute to a hybrid political theory and an invigorated, more open debate within the community of faith.

What is often overlooked is that Muslim societies are in uncertain transition, and Islamic ideas are capable of evolution as well as manipulation. Jihad, to be sure, but also wider, if not yet deeper, currents. In a reassuring way, the old fashioned Orientalist Gibb got it right: Islamism is not on a "trail of decline"; and while it is very much rising, it need not be jihadist, and can be pluralist. The quality of the internal debate – leadership in his terminology – will determine the future of political Islam. The struggle over who speaks for Islam is far from over, and it would be regrettable if we, outside the faith, decide that it is over, or impose conditions that distort it.