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# DISCUSSING ISLAM IN THE POST-9/11 EPISTEMOLOGICAL TERRAIN

Seval Yildirim\*

In response to the title of the Symposium, *Interpreting Islam for the Western World*, I would like to analyze the intellectual environment that has emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, specifically regarding discourses on Islam and Muslims.

In *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Mohammed Arkoun asserts that “any proposition is an act of power whether followed by a result or not; for a proposition implies selection from the range of significations in any tradition, thus an orientation of meaning in a particular direction from all the possible horizons of expectation of any given speaker . . . .”<sup>1</sup> In other words, stating a proposition is an act of power because it involves the selection of specific words, terms and phrases. This selection steers the audience in a certain direction, and determines not only the relevant concepts and meanings, but also their location in the construction of a discourse. If stating a proposition is indeed an act of power, then I would like to exercise this power to analyze the emergence of a new epistemological terrain in the aftermath of the events of 9/11/2001.

One of Arkoun’s many significant contributions to Islamic studies has been his assertion that there is an urgent need to discover the unthought and think the unthinkable in contemporary Islamic thought. Arkoun wants to draw attention to the

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\* Assistant Professor, Whittier Law School. I would like to thank Jeffrey M. Pollock for his comments and his help in organizing and editing this piece. I would like to thank the members of the PACE INTERNATIONAL LAW REVIEW for inviting me to this Symposium. They were also most gracious in the face of my critique of the Symposium title and the images used to portray Islam on the Symposium pamphlet cover. Rather than taking a defensive posture, they all displayed a commendable generosity in their acceptance and understanding of my critique. I thank them for their humility and open-mindedness, and for giving me the basis to formulate the following critique of how Islam and Muslims are discussed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

<sup>1</sup> MOHAMMED ARKOUN, *THE UNTHOUGHT IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT* 20 (2002).

tension between the thought and the unthought, the thinkable and the unthinkable. He writes, "[t]he unthought is made up of the accumulated issues declared unthinkable in a given logosphere."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the unthought refers to the "ideas, values, explanations, horizons of meaning . . . and ways of life" that are "discarded, rejected, ignored or doomed to failure" because of "the limits imposed by political and social pressures on the innovative and critical faculties of reason."<sup>3</sup> I start with this proposition that there is indeed a significant amount of unthought as well as thought that has been rendered unthinkable. Although Arkoun speaks specifically about Islamic thought, I would like to apply his thought and the unthought binary to the discourses that have developed in the aftermath of the tragedies of 9/11/2001, especially in the United States, although the implications of these discourses are felt throughout the globe. Because every proposition is an act of power, how we choose to articulate ourselves, our questions, and our linguistic choices in determining the way we ask these questions are all acts of power, and as parts of a more general discourse, they determine what is thought and thinkable. I hope my propositions push through the boundaries of the unthought.

The events of 9/11/2001 caused a wave in the epistemological terrain amidst which the discourses on Islam, Islamic law and Muslims take place. By epistemological terrain, I mean the entirety of the information and knowledge production, creation of a normalized knowledge base – including, but not exclusive to, the mainstream media, discourses of governments (especially that of the world hegemon, the United States), suggestive names given to military aggression, consistent display of images as representative of Islam and Muslims, and constant misappropriation and abuse of human rights language as a justification for unilateral military invasions. For instance, since 9/11/2001, we have seen repeated images of veiled Muslim women, Muslim men kneeling with foreheads touching the ground (including on the pamphlet of this symposium), and heard repeated stories about human rights abuses in Muslim majority

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 11.

countries. There are numerous television shows, like Fox's 24,<sup>4</sup> almost exclusively about the Muslim terrorist, whose beliefs and passions always look the same no matter what the ethno-geographic background. The internet is a breeding ground not just for Islamic fundamentalist discourse, but also for Islamophobic propaganda with websites like Daniel Pipes' Campus Watch,<sup>5</sup> or Robert Spencer's Jihad Watch.<sup>6</sup> Even academics who claim affinity to Muslims engage in scholarship and public discourse that make it common to talk of Muslims as always potentially dangerous. Noah Feldman's recent article, "Iran and the Bomb" in the New York Times Magazine is an example.<sup>7</sup>

I propose that we are now participants in a new epistemological terrain where there is a mainly covert acceptance of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations argument leading to overt destructive policies on the political-military front.<sup>8</sup> The clash of civilizations argument has been normalized and has been expanded upon by utilizing essentialized definitions of "the West" and "Islam" as uniform, coherent, opposing entities. In this new terrain, various forms of past and ongoing state acts of terrorism have been qualified as self-defense or as necessary in furthering human rights.<sup>9</sup>

This new epistemological terrain is one featuring a questionable Islam that needs interpretation to be understood versus the questioning West – as in the title of this symposium, *Interpreting Islam for the Western World*.

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<sup>4</sup> See generally FOX Broadcasting Company: 24, <http://www.fox.com/24> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See generally Campus Watch: Monitoring Middle East Studies on Campus, <http://www.campus-watch.org> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008) [hereinafter Campus Watch].

<sup>6</sup> See generally Jihad Watch, <http://www.jihadwatch.org> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Noah Feldman, *Islam, Terror and the Second Nuclear Age*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 29, 2006, at 650, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/29/magazine/29islam.html?ex=1175572800&en=41e3528999bd7f7c&ei=5070>.

<sup>8</sup> For Huntington's essay where he puts forth this argument, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Summer 1993, at 22-49.

<sup>9</sup> See generally Thalif Deen, *U.N. Member States Struggle to Define Terrorism*, INTER PRESS SERVICE, July 25, 2005, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=29633>.

I do not mean to suggest that this epistemological terrain is brand new or abruptly born in the aftermath of 9/11. Rather, it is a continuation of the earlier colonialist and Orientalist narratives of the civilized West versus the exotic, mystical Eastern other.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, of a new nature owing to the possibilities of our new techno-scientific age, with television and the internet making it possible to spread information, knowledge and propaganda with relative ease.<sup>11</sup> In this new epistemological terrain, it is not only expected and acceptable to seek explanations of Islam for the West, but it is even desirable and to be commended, as an act of generous inquiry – almost like when a grandparent approaches a child in play and asks “what are the parameters of your imaginary world?” The unthought part of this picture is that the grandparent is in a position of power as to the child and asks without fear, for it is to the grandparent’s paradigms to which the child must relate. In other words, the grandparent needs to understand because, after all, it is the adult world that determines what the acceptable terms and methods of play are.

Also in this new epistemological terrain, we have overt military aggression by the world hegemon, the United States, justified with the language of human rights. What I have elsewhere termed the “definitionless and boundariless” War on Terror utilizes the language of human rights and claims that its mili-

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, even the events of 9/11/2001 and the U.S. responses to them (from the invasion of Afghanistan to the invasion of Iraq, and the possible future invasion of Iran) could be seen as the continuation of alliances, interest-formations and global business objectives including, but certainly not exclusive to, Middle Eastern oil. For a much more eloquent and detailed argument of this possibility, see Jacques Derrida & Lieven De Cauter, *For a Justice to Come: an Interview with Jacques Derrida*, in *THE DERRIDA-HABERMAS READER* 259-69 (Lasse Thomassen ed., 2006). Derrida argues:

The day when this history will be written, when the documents are made public, it will become clear that September 11 was preceded by highly complicated underhand negotiations, often in Europe, on the subject of petrol-pipeline passage, at a time when the petrol clan was in power. There were intrigues and threats and it is not impossible to think that one day it will be discovered that it was really the Bush clan that was targeted rather than the country, the America of Clinton.

*Id.* at 266.

<sup>11</sup> See ARKOUN, *supra* note 1, at 224-25, 307. For a further analysis of what I call “techno-scientific age,” see Arkoun’s definition of what he refers to as “tele-techno-scientific reason” or “tele-techno-scientific civilization”). *Id.*

tary aggression and violence is only committed to realizing and furthering the inherent and basic rights of the Iraqi people.<sup>12</sup> This utilization is evident not only in the increased focus on how women are oppressed in Muslim societies, but also in the name of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” What meaningful freedom, if any, has come from this aggression is at best questionable.<sup>13</sup>

A most fundamental building block, or rather the glue to this new epistemological terrain of the questionable Islam and the questioning West, is the concept of the “moderate Muslim.” Who is this moderate Muslim, and what is it that makes her moderate? How about the concept of “moderation?” This phrase, “moderate Muslim,” is often used as an antithesis of the fundamentalist Muslim. Then, is this moderate Muslim one that internalizes Islam with moderation not entirely, not fully, but only to a certain extent, only so far as it does not contradict or challenge the propositions of the new epistemological terrain, as opposed to the fundamentalist Muslim who somehow figured out the so-called fundamentals or the core of Islam and chooses to practice it fully, internalize Islam entirely? It seems the moderate Muslim generally says Muslims should engage the governments, peoples and discourses of European and North American societies and not be hostile to market economy and liberal ideology. Of course, there are other more stringent definitions, such as Daniel Pipes’ moderate Muslim who is never critical of Israeli aggression against Palestinians and is necessarily anti-Islamist,<sup>14</sup> though it is not clear what being anti-Islamist means. Very much in keeping with President Bush’s now famous words, “You are either with us or against us,” the concept of the moderate Muslim as the desirable and unthreatening Muslim is necessary to the sustenance of this new

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<sup>12</sup> See Seval Yildirim, *Empowering the Human in Human Rights Discourse*, 100 AM. SOC’Y INT’L L. 409 (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Rather, in Iraq, we are witnessing a new form of colonization where the objective is access to the resources of the invaded land, rather than the control of the land within its apparent physical boundaries. I am indebted to my friend, Mucabit Bilici for helping me formulate this idea. For his eloquent analysis of this argument, see Mucabit Bilici, *Ummah and Empire: Global Formations after Nation*, in THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT 313, 313-27 (Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi ed., 2006). For the definition of what Bilici calls the “new (American) empire,” see *id.* at 323-24.

<sup>14</sup> See generally Campus Watch, *supra* note 5.

epistemological terrain.<sup>15</sup> It tells every actor in the terrain, Muslim or not, that there is a certain kind of Muslim that is not a threat because that Muslim, the moderate, has accepted the propositions of the powers that determine the landscape of knowledge and information. I suggest that the concept of the moderate Muslim helps create and sustain a covert fascism in this new epistemology wherein only a certain kind of Muslim is acceptable, and critical engagement with U.S. foreign policy or Israeli state aggression always translates as Islamist propaganda.

This new epistemological terrain is also hegemonic and exclusivist. Prior to 9/11, although there existed similar discourses about Islam, two things were different. First, the discourses on Islam were not available to the masses to the degree that they are today. There were news reports and images here and there, and certainly the first Gulf War introduced Saddam Hussein as the existential villain, but these were not dominant in the mass psyche. The "Muslim villain" existed alongside other thinkable villains.

Second, there existed multiple epistemological fields – not to suggest that they were all equally influential or powerful, but more of them had legitimacy. In the aftermath of 9/11, there has developed a culture of fear, perhaps a little like the nuclear scare but with a much more threatening, much more difficult to predict and to control phenomenon of the suicide bomber who is not afraid to die. With repeated statements by the various personalities of the Bush government<sup>16</sup> coupled with a color-coded

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<sup>15</sup> George W. Bush, President of the United States, The President Convenes Homeland Security Council: Remarks by the President at the Meeting of Homeland Security Advisory Council (June 12, 2002), ("And we're just going to have to enforce the doctrine, either you're with us or against us. You join the coalition of freedom, or you're on the other side of the fence."), transcript available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020612-3.html>. Later in 2002, Bush repeated his message to the United Nations General Assembly. See Julia Preston, *America's Message to the U.N.: You are with Us or Against Us*, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, Oct. 25, 2002, available at <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/24/1035416936620.html>. See also "You are Either with Us or Against Us," Nov. 6, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See generally United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform – Minority Staff Special Investigations Division, *Iraq on the Record – The Bush Administration's Public Statements on Iraq* (prepared for Rep. Henry A. Waxman), Mar. 16, 2004, available at <http://oversight.house.gov/IraqOn>

warning system,<sup>17</sup> and the new and far-reaching Homeland Security Office,<sup>18</sup> the policies and choices of the government are justified in the name of national security and self-protection. Any alternative discourse that challenges these policies is easily dismissed as un-patriotic and ignorant of contemporary realities at best, or as a supporter of terrorism at worst. For instance, in 2002, even otherwise anti-war Democratic members of Congress, like John Kerry or Hillary Clinton, voted in support of Bush's war.<sup>19</sup>

Alternative voices have been rendered to the periphery of the public psyche through the unquestioning acceptance of the perpetual fear and the ever-present danger of terror. In other words, the rhetoric of a hostile, backward, fundamental Islam that is destructive if taken as a whole or to its potential boundaries, and the need to combat this Islam not only through military combat in oil-rich lands but also through ideological and cultural means all over the globe has been the determining principle of all discourse. Any alternative perception has been relegated to the domain of the unthinkable and much of that alternative remains unthought.

We have seen floods of apologetic literature by Muslims emphasizing Islam's peaceful nature and that not all Muslims are terrorists. Such literature brings us back to the concept of the moderate Muslim who sees peace in Islam rather than ideals with which to question the status quo. With this rampant fear, there has emerged the new epistemological terrain of the questionable Islam in need of translation for a Western world, presumably consisting of the various and varying components of

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TheRecord/pdf\_admin\_iraq\_on\_the\_record\_rep.pdf. The report contains "237 misleading statements made by Bush Administration officials about the threat posed by Iraq." Government Reform Minority Office, *About Iraq on the Record*, <http://oversight.house.gov/IraqOnTheRecord/> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> See *Terror Threat Warning System Revealed*, Mar. 12, 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/03/12/rec.threat.alerts/index.html> (last visited Apr. 11, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> See Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135, available at [http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hr\\_5005\\_enr.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hr_5005_enr.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See Deborah White, *Iraq War Vote 2002: 156 Congress Members Who Voted No*, ABOUT.COM: LIBERAL POLITICS: U.S., <http://usliberals.about.com/od/liberalleadership/a/IraqNayVote.htm> (last visited Nov. 18, 2007). This is not to imply that there was a unanimous vote either in the House of Representatives or the Senate approving the Bush Administration's war plans. For a list of the Congress members who voted against invading Iraq, see *id.*



North America and Western Europe. This new epistemological terrain has become hegemonic because it has succeeded in presenting itself as the only safe and secure terrain. If we step outside its boundaries, we are either a threat because we pose a danger as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, or we are in danger because we participate in making it easier for the terrorists.

This new epistemological terrain is not simply local; rather, it is increasingly global. Although in the United States we are in the epicenter of this terrain, its soil is present all over the globe in increasing polarization between public discourses framed as secular versus fundamentalist, as well as in government reactions to and policies concerning these discourses. In fact, the War on Terror rhetoric has been utilized by numerous governments to justify and perpetuate policies of oppression and the curbing of individual freedoms. For example, the Russian government has repeatedly justified its military aggression against the Chechen people in terms of fighting Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>20</sup> The prohibition on headcoverings in Turkish government spaces has been justified on the basis of fighting Islamic fundamentalism, which is the argument that has been accepted by the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>21</sup> So, even an international juristic body has now been converted to a resident of this new epistemological terrain. Again, references to Islamic fundamentalism are common in debates over headcoverings throughout Europe.

Given the restrictive and even oppressive nature of this new epistemological terrain, should we then not ask any questions about Islam and Muslims? Silence and sustained ignorance is not the way to alter this terrain. Rather, we must deconstruct the propositions of this terrain by subversive strategies by seeking the unthought and the unthinkable, by questioning every concept that is used to build, sustain and foster this new epistemological terrain. We must continuously strive

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Mark Baker, *Russia: On Beslan, Putin Looks Beyond Chechnya, Sees International Terror*, RADIO FREE EUROPE, RADIO LIBERTY, Sept. 7, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/09/ce476827-01ec-417f-a41c-44b2019e125f.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Leyla Sahin v. Turkey, 18 Eur. Ct. H.R. 590 (2005), available at <http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/default.htm> (follow "Access Hudoc Collection" hyperlink; then search "Case Title" for "Leyla Sahin v. Turkey"; then follow "1. Case of Leyla Sahin v. Turkey" hyperlink).

for even the slightest shifts toward an ideal epistemology that is inclusive and pluralist. By this, I imagine a terrain that recognizes and incorporates multiple voices equally, and at least recognizes the privileging of certain voices over others.

Keeping in mind that every proposition is an act of power, we must choose our words carefully and always question which power base we are supporting. To that end, I propose that we question the use of the concept of “interpretation” when discussing Islam. Interpretation is a necessity between parties who are foreign to each other and who share no common linguistic system with which to communicate. Islam and its cultural manifestations are not foreign to any part of the world. Even in this country, Islam is no stranger not only because of immigrant communities, but also because of the long-rooted presence of Islam in black communities. Subversive strategies must include a re-assessment of narratives presented as historical truisms that portray Islam as only limited to Asia and Africa.

The polarization of “Islam” versus “the West” is political and ideological. It is not historical, and it does not have to be epistemological.