

**CHERYL BENARD : DEMOCRATIC ISLAM NEW YORK. THE RAND. CROP  
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The post 9/11 era has made the western thinking elite take Islam seriously. An effort is being made to understand Islamic values and ideals and to discover some similarities of ideals. This it is hoped, would pave the way for the West to put its own meanings into the epistemological heritage of Islam. Post modernism, in the last century, has already made it impossible to accept Western ideals, values and culture as universal, or rational. Why should Western civilization be considered as superior?. No answer can be given to this question except that the West has such military power that it can enforce its values and culture on the world. This exercise of hard power can clearly be observed in Afghanistan and Iraq. It would however be a grave mistake to use hard power where soft power could suffice and it makes sense to develop strategies for 'friends among foes'. This is where Cheryl Benard comes in.

Benard is a senior political scientist who has researched radicalism, public diplomacy and women in development in the Islamic world at several European and American research institutes. She is also a member of numerous academic and governmental advisory commissions. Her expertise lies in Afghanistan and Middle East affairs. The Rand Corporation funded her research which has been summarized in this book which seeks to understand the root of the problems the Muslim world faces today. This book tries to identify public initiatives which the West can take to 'rebuild Islam' as a more moderate, democratic, peaceful, and tolerant social order so that the global systemic threats to America can be contained..

Benard finds the Muslim world involved in internal and external struggles over its values. These struggles are likely to have an affect on the West in the years to come. Benard argue that "The west would prefer an Islamic world that is compatible with the rest of the system: democratic, economically viable, politically stable, socially progressive, and following the rules and norms of the international community." Efforts are being made to produce this desired outcome and to reduce hatred against America.

Benard mentions two main reasons for the current crises the Muslim world is involved in. First, a failure to thrive second, a loss of connection to the global main stream. As compared to western countries the Muslim world is far behind in all disciplines and the long period of backwardness has made Muslims frustrated. Muslims have made considerable efforts to flourish and prosper but without success. Out of this frustration Muslims step out to commit suicidal killings and attacks on western belongings. On the other hand some Islamic groups think differently and try to integrate within the Western international community

Benard categorizes Muslim responses to contemporary issues into four different groups: Fundamentalists, Traditionalists, Modernists, and Secularists. She does not try to conceal her utmost hatred for Fundamentalists and considers them "as a whole incompatible with the values of civil society and the Western vision of civilization, political order ,and society" (page 4). Fundamentalists totally reject Western social and political order which cannot provide a framework for their extreme view of Islamic law and morality" (page x). Fundamentalists strive for the establishment of a universal state where Islamic Shari a' could be implemented in its full. They make it practically impossible for any sort of reconciliation and every aspect of the Western value structure becomes illegitimate for them. Bernard argues that this project of the establishment of a universal Islamic state commits the Fundamentalists to the principled opposition of the West. So she constantly speaks of destroying fundamentalist forces on every plane. She distinguishes two strands within fundamentalism i.e. Scriptural and Radical represented respectively by the Iranian revolutionaries on the one hand and, Saudi based Wahabis and Al -Qaeda on the other. She

rejects both of these as probable allies or partners and proposes that the West should seek to delegitimise them by all means.

Benard is moderately sympathetic towards Traditionalists. They also look backward for resurgence of Islam and love to live in a conservative society. They are reluctant to adopt modern values. Traditionalists can be divided into two distinct groups ; Conservative traditionalists and Reformist traditionalists.” Conservative traditionalists’ seek to preserve orthodox norms and values and traditional behavior patterns. The temptations and the pace of modern life are seen as posing a major threat to this. Their posture is one of resistance to change. But those Traditionalists who live in the West for years adopt more modern views and are linked to the transitional discourse on issues of orthodoxy .Reformist traditionalists prepared to discuss reforms and reinterpretations .Their posture is one of cautious adaptation to change, being flexible on the letter of the law to conserve the spirit of the law.

The Modernists identify a vital element (essential core) in Islam that must be modified in accordance with varying circumstances. They believe in the historicity of Islam. Modernists are not shy in rejecting orthodox interpretations of Islam or to redefine Islamic values as appropriate to the present age. Core Western values certainly find a central place in their discourses. Benard rightly realizes “Their core values-the primacy of the individual conscience and a community based on social responsibility, equality and freedom-are easily compatible with modern democratic norms.”

The Secularists believe in a sharp separation of religion and politics. They consider both of these disciplines as belonging to different spheres. The state should not interfere in individual religious affairs but “religious customs must be in conformity with the law of the land and with human rights.”

Bernard believes in the universality of human rights and democratic social structure. She deliberately ignores the particular historical and social background of these political ideologies. She assumes, that Western political social and moral ideals deserve to be followed everywhere and America can play a role to enforce their universality through “hard power” or “soft power”. Transcendence of these values and structures is out of the question. “Either you are with us or with our enemy” says George W. Bush.

In the next section of the book Bernard briefly proposes a strategy to identify the potential partners among Islamic groups. Only two among these four are seem as close to the West in terms of values and policies i.e. Modernists and Secularists. Fundamentalists and Traditionalists, in varying degrees, oppose America and the West. Fundamentalists explicitly and totally reject western culture and democratic modernity. Bernard advocate total war against the Fundamentalists. They cannot be reformed. Though Scriptural Fundamentalists (Wahabis and Shia’) can be tolerated but the West’s strategy must be based on geopolitical, tactical, and economic considerations and must not represent an endorsement of a scriptural Fundamentalist regime or its lifestyle and ideology (p.29). On the whole America should develop measures to discredit there regimes among the masses on political, social and epistemological planes.

Traditionalists are supposed to be vulnerable and can be persuaded to accept foreign ideas but there are significant differences among them. ‘Reformist Traditionalists’ views on social and lifestyle issues are more compatible with international modernity’ (p.30) but they don’t condemn terrorism and political violence. Benard is not happy to note that although Traditionalists widely denounced the September counter attacks on America but they did not condemn subsequent “terrorism” or violence and went on record to condemn the killing of civilians by Israel. She presents a number of examples of Traditionalist figures who are ‘progressive’ on many crucial issues but aggressive on the issue of an ‘Islamic’ foreign policy regarding Palestine, Kashmir and in all countries where Muslims are being suppressed. Their views seem to coincide with hard liner Fundamentalists. It is suggested that the West must discourage alliances between Fundamentalists and Traditionalists and “try to encourage cooperation between Modernists and Traditionalists who are closer to the modernist end of the spectrum (p.xi)”

The Modernists are the West’s most reliable and potential allies in terms of values and policies. Desire to become part of global modernity bring them close to the West. They want to modernize and reform Islam to bring it into line with the age. Modernists usually emphasize the need to “look for the

true message of Islam” rather than be bound by text and tradition. This creates possibilities, for the West, to appeal to their vision and persuade them to believe in the values of modern democratic society. But she notes two weaknesses which lessen their strength “On ideological grounds, the Modernists are the most credible vehicle for developing and transmitting democratic Islam, but in the current reality, they operate under a number of handicaps that significantly reduces their effectiveness” (p.39). She feels that Modernists are not supported with money, infrastructure, weapons, media and access to other platforms, control over educational and welfare institutions, etc. On the other hand both Fundamentalists and Traditionalists possess enormous resources and can influence the masses. Modernists don’t possess considerable political support and their posture exposes them to danger. She suggests that the West should help them in building legitimacy and credibility in Muslim societies. “They should be cultivated and publicly presented as the face of contemporary Islam. This would break the Fundamentalist and Traditionalist monopoly on defining explaining, and interpreting Islam.” (p.47). Appropriate modernist scholars should be identified to manage a web site that answers questions related to daily conduct and offers modernist Islamic legal opinions (p.48). That would ultimately provide space where Western values can be considered as acceptable, legitimate and natural by Muslim. Promotion of Western values can only be possible through reinterpreting Islam and discrediting the traditional authorities and scholars of religion in Muslim societies. Moreover suspicions regarding the authenticity of Muslim history should be promoted. Disassociation from their own history and civilization ultimately leads Muslim to embracing democratic values, and the Western way of life.

Secularists are also close to the West in terms of values and policies. They believe that political affairs must be separated from religion and find resemblance with Western democracies which are also premised on the separation of church and state. It follows that Secularists are the most natural allies of the ‘West in the Muslim world. It must be noted that the author does not discuss their views and the proposed strategy for allying with Secularists at great length. It, in my view, is due to the fact that Secularists are not ‘others’ i.e they are not involved in any such discourse which could be troublesome for the West. The author feels that “many Secularists in the Islamic world are unfriendly or even extremely hostile to us (Americans) on other grounds. Leftist ideologies, anti-Americanism, aggressive nationalism, and authoritarian structures with only quasi-democratic trappings have been some of the manifestations of Islamic secularism to date.” Another problem is that Secularists are not fitted into Muslim societies and their views always seem to be foreign structured. But the author has a contrasting example of Turkey where Secularists have managed to hold power, legitimacy and even popularity. So this provides some space to work with Secularists.

To sum up, we can say that the American strategy proposed by Bernard can be divided into two steps. First, Fundamentalists can never be treated as working associates so they have to be dealt with through ‘Hard Power’ as this has been practised in Afghanistan and Iraq. Next, Modernists are the category of utmost importance who can work as the natural coalition partners of the West while Traditionalists are also supposed to be close but uneasy friends. The use of ‘soft power’ is suggested. Academic training, foreign university scholarships, seminars, conferences are some of the measures used to mould them. Secularists can also be separated from nationalists and leftist forces through these means.

Today the West does not have any rational argument to justify its values—freedom, equality and progress -- in universal terms and therefore enjoys no superiority in this context Military power is its main weapon for imposing its ideologies on the rest of the world.. Post modernist thinkers of the West often admit this fact. Democracy and human rights have no demonstrable universal legitimacy. Having abandoned the half truths of Christianity, the West, has no truth to proclaim. Its epistemological discourses are self contradictory, incoherent and banal.

