Islam and the West: A multidimensional relationship

PROFESSOR RACHAD ANTONIUS

Professor Rachad Antonius is investigating the links between three fields of power relations centred on the Middle East: international relations between Western countries and Middle Eastern political actors, relationships between Muslim migrant communities in the West and their host societies, and relationships between Muslim minorities and non-Muslim minorities in the Arab world. Although these fields are usually studied separately, Antonius contends that they have deep and under-recognised effects on each other. He has created a conceptual framework that provides analytical tools for better understanding the interaction and intersection of each of the three spheres of power relations.

1 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

• Western colonialism/imperialism – Western policies in Muslim-majority countries have triggered several responses, including Islamic resistance movements and the rise of Islamic identity politics. In several cases, the strongest allies of Western countries have been conservative Islamic regimes, such as Saudi Arabia – a factor which has boosted Salafi and Jihadi political movements.

• International terrorism and the War on Terror – The emergence of terrorism has affected the way international politics is pursued. It has triggered the ‘war on terror’ as a tactic, which has opened the door to more Western intervention in the Middle East and impacted the civil rights of residents in Western countries. Terrorism has also been a factor in the rise of hostile discourses that targets all Muslims.

• Geopolitical issues – The strategic geographic location of the Middle East and its rich oil and gas reserves have made its control a major stake in international affairs. Additionally, the Middle East has been fighting its ground in a world whose balance of power is shifting from unipolar (in which the US is the sole superpower) to multipolar (in which Brazil, Russia, India and China [BRICs] are growing in political and economic prominence).

2 MUSLIM MIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

• Integration/exclusion/self-exclusion – On top of the difficulties that face all migrants, Orientalist views of Arabs and Muslims have become additional obstacles, sometimes leading to discrimination against them. The emergence of conservative religious trends within Muslim groups has created additional barriers to social integration in a society that many within these conservative groups consider immoral. A minority of Muslims have developed an attitude of rejection towards the host societies and the values they espouse, triggering further hostility in response.

• Media representations of Arabs and Muslims – Dominant discourses often reflect racist stereotypes, promote an ‘us-versus-them’ dichotomy, and establish and reinforce power relations in which Arabs and Muslims are less powerful. Words and images are transposed from an international to a local context, allowing negative stereotypes to flourish and driving associations between Islam and violence, Islam and terrorism, etc.

• Tensions between public and private religion – Republicanism centres on the notion of a common secular public space. Ideologically, it is reluctant to accept – and can even be hostile towards – the expression of religious identity in public spaces. In a multicultural society, this can lead to conflict with some immigrant groups who put religion at the heart of their collective identity and political actions.

3 MUSLIM SOCIETIES: SOCIAL ISSUES AND RELATIONS WITH THE ‘OTHER’

• Islamic identity v citizenship – When a State bases itself on religion, citizens cease to become equal because some claim that their choices are God’s rule (thus the absolute truth). If States are endowed with upholding moral duties in addition to their legal and political ones (a premise of political Islam), they cease to represent all of their citizens equally because not all citizens believe in the same dogma or share the same interpretations of said dogma.

• Relations with the ‘Other’ – If national identity is defined in reference to a specific religion, justified on the basis that most of its citizens share it, this automatically excludes all of those who do not identify as belonging to that particular religion. No country in the Middle East is religiously homogeneous.

• Political culture and the rise of Salafism and Wahhabism – The past few decades have witnessed the rise of fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Salafi interpretations of religion are now part of the mainstream trends in many Muslim societies. They acquired some prominence in many post-revolt societies, most notably in Tunisia and Egypt, but they have also been vigorously opposed.

Definitions

SALAFISM – a doctrine within Islam that calls for rigid emulation of the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers, and interprets the Holy Quran literally. Quietist or purist Salafi trends stay away from politics, while activists and jihadiists believe they should work toward implementing Sharia, through violence if needed.

WAHhabISM – a trend within Salafism that is the official doctrine of the Saudi Arabia ruling clan, named after its founder, Ibn Abdul Wahhab.

POLITICAL ISLAM – refers to political organisations and trends that seek to put Islamic dogma at the heart of their political action.

WAR ON TERROR – coined after the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11, this term describes a series of military actions taken by a government abroad, aimed at destroying ‘terrorist’ groups, and a series of security measures aimed at preventing terrorist groups from acting within national boundaries.
RACHAD ANTONIUS is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Québec in Montreal, Canada. With an academic background in Sociology and Mathematics, his most recent publications explore issues surrounding Arab and Muslim minorities in Canada and Quebec, political conflicts in the Middle East, measurements of inequality and quantitative methods in social research. He has worked as a consultant for the UN and UNICEF and is affiliated with the Inter-University Consortium for Arab Studies and the Near East and the Francophone Research Network on Peace Operations.