CHAPTER V

The American Weltanschauung and Conceptualizations of American Interests

Islam and Modernity: Modernization and/or Westernization

Islam’s encounter with modernity is not a new theme in Western scholarship on Islam and the Muslim world. In fact, it dates back to the era of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and has recurred steadfastly in the Western discourse on Islam ever since. Islam was presented as antithetical to the spirit of modernity as embodied in the post-Enlightenment era. Islam was associated with anti-modern traits: fostering despotism, incapability of change, suppression of individual liberties, lack of economic liberalization, and so forth. In short, Islam was presented as a series of gaps and absences when posited against the Western experiences in the post-Enlightenment era. The perceived incompatibility between Islam and modernity was accrued to the spirit of the religion. This perception amalgamated to one of the most recurrent motifs in the Orientalist discourse; namely, the lack of change in Muslim societies.

With regard to the American Islamicist discourse, two trends can be discerned: the one following the Orientalist tradition, emphasizing the incompatibility of Islam with modernity. This trend brings this idea to account for political, economic and social issues in the Muslim world, as well as to relations between the Muslim world and the West in the contemporary world. The other trend (MESA scholars) offers an alternative reading of Islam’s encounter with modernity and the implications of that encounter for the various developments in the Muslim world and the way this relates to the West-Muslim world relations. This question has acquired additional
significance in the course of the last two decades as the debate over a host of issues, including the nature of the role the United States has to play in the Arab world, intensified to an unprecedented scale. Theoretical approaches as well as approaches to the question of power are influential in deciding the contours of the debate. The differences between the two trends are also determined by their respective definitions of modernity, what it involves to be modern, who can be a modernizer, and what path she/he shall adopt. Thus, the discussion of Islam and modernity in the American discourse on Islam and the Muslim world is not a purely intellectual matter, but carries political implications.

Bernard Lewis stands as the major proponent of the first trend. In Lewis’s writings, the relation of Islam to modernity follows a single trajectory of confrontation in all aspects, embedded within the idea of civilizational clashes. To Lewis, modernity is an exclusively Western phenomenon that could not have taken place elsewhere. Since Islam is essentially anti-modern and anti-Western, it is implicated in a constant war with modernity and modern civilization. It rejects modernization partly because it is Western and, more significantly, because it is antithetical to its spirit. Lewis approaches this question with the view that Islam is a closed system of meanings and ideas, inscribed within an essence that is completely antithetical to the spirit of modernity. The central idea in Lewis is that civilizations follow a cycle of rise, growth and decline. When a civilization is in a state of decline and decay—as is the case with the Islamic civilization—it has no choice but to follow the ways of the flourishing civilization, and adopt its ideas in a collective manner. “The world has seen many civilizations,” Lewis (1997) writes, “Each has grown and flourished in its day, then passed away. In this point in history only one is still alive.
We must join it or be uncivilized” (p. 127). This is the only viable course for modernization, in Lewis’s view. Lewis cites the model of Ataturk as successful because it adopted Western civilization in its entirety. Modernization is simply Westernization, and interaction between civilizations, especially the Islamic and Western civilization, is merely one of a clash rather than a multi-faceted encounter. Therefore, the decaying civilization has no other option but to follow the way of the victorious one: “[w]hen civilizations meet and clash, however, what all too often results is not a marriage of the best but a promiscuous cohabitation of the worst” (Ibid., 127). In other words, modernization and Westernization are inseparable. Modernization means complete Westernization in all walks of life, both public and private.

Modernization is thus judged by the extent to which Westernization has taken hold in the institutional and private spheres. In this sense, Islam is the barrier to modernization in the Arab world. Lewis’s conception of modernity is ethnocentric and exclusivist: the “dominant civilization is Western, and Western standards, therefore, define modernity” (Ibid., p. 130). Adoption of modern aspects while retaining some cultural aspects falls short of Lewis’s definition of modernization, especially as the two civilizations are implicated in an unceasing clash, rather than a wider relation of interaction. Hence, those who tend to emphasize borrowing rather than wholesale import are indulged in a project doomed to failure. According to Lewis, the “supermarket” approach to modernization in which one borrows some, rather than adopts all, aspects cannot bring modernization (Ibid., p. 125).

In Lewis’s view, Islam is by nature anti-modern. It is antithetical to modernity. That is why, Lewis explains, modernity took place in the West rather than in the
Muslim world which was more sophisticated than the West. And that was due to the persistence of Islam in the affairs of Muslims, “[w]hat is clearly incompatible with both Western civilization and its distinctive brand of modernity is the subordination of the state and of science to religious control” (Ibid., p. 124). The diverse discourses and approaches to modernization in the Arab world, according to Lewis, are a testimony to the failed encounter with modernity. In the Arab world, Lewis observes, “the debate about this process and the decisions the process requires has been going on for almost three centuries” (Ibid., p. 116). Islam, thus, cannot co-exist with modernity. It has simply to be dispensed with altogether since it is the cause of the lack of modernization in the Lewisian definition. The attempt of some Muslim countries and groups to modernize certain aspects such as the adoption of the technological advances while retaining some other aspects of their cultural heritage cannot bring modernity to those counties, in Lewis’s view. Modernization of the armies brought them only defeat, modernization of the economy brought only more poverty, and so on (Ibid., p. 122). Their failure to modernize turned to a feeling of massive hatred and rage directed against the West, as Lewis explains in many of his books and articles,

[b]ut during the past three centuries, the Islamic world has lost its dominance and its leadership, and has fallen behind both the modern West and the rapidly modernizing Orient. This widening gap poses increasingly acute problems, both practical and emotional, for which the rulers, thinkers, and rebels of Islam have not yet found effective answers. (Lewis 2003a: 4; emphasis added)

The Ataturkian model of modernization is the only one possible, and if need be, it has to be imposed by force of arms, the “first lessons of civilizational change are most effectively and perspicuously administered on the battlefield. The others follow somewhat later, and often in a more ambiguous form” (1997: 116). “Defeat in the
battlefield,” according to Lewis, “is surely the most perspicuous of all forms of instruction, and has a cogency lacking in purely verbal communication” (1993a: 28).

According to Lewis (2002b), as Western Christian civilization came to produce and embody modernity in the last three hundred years, Muslim civilization first rejected modernity due to its Christian nature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then tried to emulate this Christian modernity after realizing that this was the only method for survival against the expansion of Western modernity. Lewis also implies that Muslims again turned against the West and modernity in recent decades due to their perennial failures in the emulation of the Christian West. Lewis (2002b) gives scholarly weight to the argument that the cause of Muslim discontent with the international order and antipathy toward the West stem from the Muslims’ inability to harmonize Islam and modernity.

Lewis dismisses the reform movements in the Muslim world as reactionary forces, merely reclining to an anti-modern past. This gives rise to emotions of hatred and violent targeting of the West. Their speakers are Ayatollah Khomeini and bin Laden; and their malaise derives from Islam itself. They hate the West for what it is. It may be noted that such effort of modernization while preserving indigenous cultural practices is not restricted to the so-called “fundamentalists” but is also advocated by a wide range of intellectuals and activists of all stripes. Lewis brings Khomeini’s designation of the United States as the “great Satan” as representative of the whole spectrum of voices and attitudes, tracing it to Islam itself:

No intelligence service is needed to interpret this epithet [“great Satan”]—just a copy of the Koran. The last verses, the best known along with the first, talk about Satan, describing him ‘the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men.” Satan is not a conqueror, not an imperialist, not a capitalist, not an exploiter. He is a seducer. He comes with Barbie dolls
and cocktails and provocative TV programs and movies and, worst of all, emancipated women. (1997:127; Lewis (1995: 18) also rehearses this same argument.)

To Lewis, modernization is not a “supermarket” from which one can buy the commodities she/he likes. It has to be taken wholesale in all its aspects including the cultural baggage and way of life. Failure to incorporate these along with the technological and material aspects results inevitably in a failure to modernize. Lewis’s conceptualization of democratization in the Arab world derives in a sense from his notion of modernization. Pressing for democratic openings and demanding free and fair elections, a process in which Islamist activism plays a major role in several Arab countries, becomes suspect. To Lewis, the “fundamentalists had no use for democracy, except as a one-way ticket to power” (2004: 225). Islamist activism is especially attacked by the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists in discussions of democratization. It is represented as an anti-modern force. Early on, Islamist activism was represented as anti-modern in all aspects, rejecting modern technology and material advances: medieval-looking and backward. Even though such images still persist in the media and public culture, they have been modified in the Orientalist discourse to suit emerging developments. Islamists are portrayed as Machiavellian opportunists, who utilize modern technology to wage war against the West, and who adopt the language of democracy and pluralism just to win power and then reverse the very process that had brought them to power. The threat is no more a bearded Mullah in traditional garb, but potentially every ‘modern’ Muslim as well. Pipes (2002) writes, “Islamists see their adherence to Islam primarily as a form of political allegiance; though usually pious Muslims they need not be. Plenty of Islamists tend to be rather impious.” Pipes continues, the “mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York, Ramzi Yusuf, has a girlfriend while living in the Philippines
and was “gallivanting around Manila’s bars, strip-joints and karaoke clubs, flirting with women.” The same pattern applies to several of the September 11 suicide hijackers” (pp. 8-9). The evident contradiction that does not bother the Orientalists, however, is their interpolation of religion to account for the actions of those who supposedly carried out such acts, when these people are not schooled in ‘religious bigotry’, to grant the validity of this phrase.

Pipes does not restrict his remarks to the violent fringe in the Muslim world, however. His definition of “militant Islam” encompasses the majority of Muslims, despite their adoption of modern ways. What he designates “militant Islam” is inherently incompatible with the spirit of modernity. “Militant Islam is inherently incompatible with liberal values and no dilution of it can be made to fit into the modern world. There is, in other words, no such thing as a moderate Islamist. Islamist professions of democratic intent are false and need to be discounted” (2003a: xi). Ismail (2006) observes that the “view of Islam as anti-modern rests on the assumption that modernisation rests on secularisation and the retreat of religion from the public sphere. Islamism thus appears as an expression of an anti-modern strand that, for some, is inherent in the religion” (p. 3). In Lewis’s argument, the anti-modern nature of Islamist activism is what he sees as their reaction against secularization and their attempts to reverse the scanty progress that has been achieved. “More recently,” Lewis writes, “there has been a strong reaction against these changes. A whole series of Islamic radical and militant movements, loosely and inaccurately designated as “fundamentalist,” share the objective of undoing the secularizing reforms of the last century, abolishing the imported codes of law and the social customs that came with them, and returning to the Holy Law of Islam and an Islamic political order” (2002:}
The conviction that Islamist activism is incompatible with modernity as it sets, as Lewis maintains, to reverse the few advances that had been gained in the last two centuries constitutes a central theme in Lewis’s writings. Lewis (1990) explicitly implants it in the “clash of civilizations” theme. The political dimension to this portrayal, however, is clearly unveiled as Lewis becomes the intellectual mentor of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”. His priority after Iraq was not Iran or Syria as other neo-conservatives preferred, but the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and elsewhere. Lewis states that the “Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt represents a real danger”. (As quoted by Kempe, 2005: A11).

Lewis (2002b; 2003a) maintains that Islam’s encounter with modernity and the subsequent failure to modernize due to factors inherent in the religion has had a lasting impact on Muslims, who kept asking the wrong questions and hence failed to put matters right. The West has therefore to intervene and put Muslims on the right track by military force. He writes,

> When things go wrong in a society, in a way and to a degree that can no longer be denied or concealed, there are various questions that one can ask. A common one, particularly in continental Europe yesterday and in the Middle East today, is: “Who did this to us?” The answer to a question thus formulated is usually to place the blame on external or domestic scapegoats—foreigners abroad or minorities at home. The Ottomans, faced with the major crisis in their history, asked a different question: “What did we do wrong?” The debate on these two questions began in Turkey immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Carlowitz; it resumed with a new urgency after Küçük Kaynarca. In a sense it is still going on today. (2002: 22-23)

Lewis relates the notion of modernization to imperial conquest. As there are no signs of change, the West has to play the role of modernizing the Arab world, since “the lessons of history are most perspicuously and unequivocally taught on the battlefield, but there may be some delay before the lesson is understood and applied” (2002: 7-8).
In Lewis’s account, Islam’s anti-modern nature resides in a series of gaps that can be discerned in the religion and Arab/Muslim culture, which he summarized in a metaphorical account of an English ship landing in Istanbul in the sixteenth century (Lewis, 1997). To Lewis what was true then—even though his account of the past is selective—still holds true today. Those gaps include the lack of freedom, suppression of women, lack of good governance, slavery, lack of scientific inquiry, etc. which he traces to the religion (Lewis, 1997). Lewis traces the lack of freedom philologically to the Islamic tradition. He argues that in Islamic tradition, the opposite of ‘oppression’ is ‘justice’, not ‘freedom’ (2005: 39). Philological analysis, however, cannot explain historical developments. It merely creates an unchanging essence, the very idea Lewis seeks to convey.

Lewis identifies Islam as the barrier to modernization. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam continues to play a role in the private and increasingly in the political sphere. The failure to secularize is the malady of the Muslim world in Lewis’s diagnosis. Muslims, Lewis explains, continue to identify along religious groupings despite the existence of nation states which are superseded by religious identification.

The reasons why Muslims developed no secularist movement of their own, and reacted sharply against attempts to introduce one from abroad, will thus be clear from the contrasts between Christian and Muslim history and experience. From the beginning, Christians were taught both by precept and practice to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction. (2002b: 103)

The social scientists, on the other hand, present another view of Islam’s relation to modernity. Their point of departure is that, like all other world religions, Islam is open to interpretation and accommodation of new ideas. Muslim intellectuals and thinkers, belonging to diverse schools of thought sought to reinterpret Islam in a
way relevant to contemporary issues. MESA experts on Islam assign the writings of those intellectuals a good deal of attention in their studies of the Muslim world. The definition of modernization that had prevailed up to the late 1970s; namely that modernization and Westernization are identical, has been superseded by a mediocre view of modernization. A country can be modern without necessarily being westernized. This view is held by many in the field of Middle East studies.

According to this trend, the Muslim world is passing through a transitional period due to many factors, of which the encounter with modernity is one but not the only one. They tend to draw similarities between this transition and that of the European countries during the Reformation. The challenge of modernity, in this view, is coupled with other challenges such as colonialism, the persistence of authoritarianism, and other economic and political challenges. Scholars also maintain that Islam and Arab culture are not inherently anti-modern. Referring to the American support for the authoritarian Arab regimes, Esposito (1999) writes,

[the easy excuse for looking the other way and continuing to support autocratic Middle Eastern regimes is the claim that Islam is antidemocratic or that Islam or Arab culture is not conducive to democratization and modernity. Ironically, a similar concern and policy were not adapted [sic.] with regard to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Is it because the peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, steeped in decades of communist rule and socialization, are somehow less prone to authoritarianism? Or because we believe that a shared Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, with the West provided a more accommodating ideological soil, is inherently more democratic? Are we still being held back by the baggage of the past? A combination of ignorance and stereotyping, history and experience as well as religiocultural chauvinism often blind even the best intentioned when dealing with the Arab and Muslim world. (p. 215)

Instead of viewing developments and diverse phenomena through the lenses of the “clash of civilizations” and the “Islamic threat,” MESA academics focus on the contexts that gave rise to those developments, thus completely dispensing with the
simplistic accounts of inherent traits. Modernity is also defined differently. Some MESA scholars argue that there is no single modernity and that modernity means different things to different peoples in different contexts. Moreover, ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ (or modernization and westernization) can no longer be treated as synonyms. Hence, it is deemed inappropriate to regard the Western variant of modernity as the sole yardstick and single norm against which everything should be measured only to be found lacking (Lockman, 2004a: 220). According to Burke (1998) the movements of reform and modernization in the Muslim world were contextualized in the complicated settings in which they operated and the circumstances that gave rise to them. He criticizes what he regards as the residues of Orientalism: “conceiving of the relationship between modernity and religion in terms of a totalizing opposition locks us all into a Weberian iron cage from which there is no exit” (p. 503). Similarly, Schaar (1979) argues that the “progressive forces within Islam have always been there. The problem is to flush them out from behind the veil of Orientalist obscurity” (p. 79). The supportive attitude of many MESA academics of democratization and political liberalization testifies to the fact that they depart from the old conception that modernization is identical with Westernization.

The upsurge of Islamist activism posed a challenge to the modernization theory which prevailed in Middle East studies until the late 1970s. Scholars departed from the conventional position. The literature focusing on the Islamist upsurge views these movements as the products of late twentieth-century society (Lockman, 2004a: 220). This literature emphasizes, not their invocation of tradition, but their modernity and contemporaneity despite their rhetorical appeal to the past. They are viewed as responses to contemporary problems such as corrupt authoritarian regimes, mass
unemployment, external domination, and so on. Such movements are put on a par with other movements in the Third World, stressing such themes as liberation vs. oppression, authenticity vs. corruption, and the masses vs. the elite. MESA scholars also emphasize the diversity of those movements according to the countries in which they operate. And the various circumstances peculiar to each. Moreover, that literature emphasizes the modern nature of those movements; they are not viewed as a retreat to the past, but rather modern movements utilizing modern technology and modern forms of political organization (Halliday, 1995: 401-402). According to Lockman (2004a), the political and social visions of those movements, the way they are put forth, and the efforts to realize them “would not only not have made sense to earlier generations of Muslims but reflected the appropriation and incorporation of many thoroughly modern concepts” (emphasis in the original) such as democracy, the nation-state, popular sovereignty, anti-imperialism, science, and social justice, as well as modern forms of political organization, propaganda and action—including modern media, the political party, the mass movement and mass protests. Moreover, their leaders, activists and intellectuals are modern-educated and their discourses are characteristic of modernity (p. 220). Beinin (2005) maintains that “political Islam is not a recrudescence of medieval thinking and rejection of modernity; it is an integral part of modernity” (pp. 113-114).

A related question is democratization in the Arab countries, and whether Islam is compatible with democracy. Esposito and Voll (1994) rebut the argument that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy in an article provocatively entitled “Islam’s Democratic Essence”. They argue that those who maintain that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy proceed from “two faulty assumptions”;
namely, “that democracy is possible only in one form, and that Islam can be expressed in only one way”. They further argue that the “Islamic heritage, in fact, contains concepts that provide a foundation for contemporary Muslims to develop theoretically Islamic programs of democracy” (Ibid.). Esposito and Voll (1996) opine that the resurgence of Islam and the desire for democratization in the Muslim world exist in a dynamic global context. Throughout the world, many peoples express similar desires, making religious resurgence and democratization two of the most important themes in contemporary world affairs. The assertion of special communal identities and the demand for increased popular political participation occur in a complex world environment in which technology reinforces global relationships at the same time that local and national cultural identities remain remarkably strong. (p. 11)

Bulliet (2004a) explains that the relevant question is not “what went wrong?” but rather “what went on?” (p. 91). The history of the Muslim world, according to Bulliet, cannot be constructed “in terms of missed goals” (Ibid., p. 91). Bulliet maintains that the Islamic law (the Sharia) places checks and balances against tyranny, and as the ulama acted as the guardians of justice, the governments sought to marginalize them and succeeded in that effort. Yet, the success of the governments in this move and the subsequent enforcement of tyrannical rule alienated the public who sought other ways of acting against the tyrannical rulers. The new mass movements that succeeded the ulama as authorities against tyranny appealed to the masses. The success of those movements in attracting many followers was facilitated by the manipulation of modern means such as printing presses and technological means. Furthermore, the age-old “tradition of mobilizing the faithful against tyranny and foreign intrusion” also contributed to that success (pp. 90-91). Bulliet concludes that “Railing against Islam as a barrier to democracy cannot make it go away so long as tyranny is a fact of life for most Muslims” (p. 93). He further opines that the touchstone to modernity is not technology since in this regard no group is “more
assiduous” than al-Qaeda in exploiting modern technology. Rather, the “problem is the proposition that technology and Western social and governmental practices are an indivisible package.” It is in this regard that “decades of frustration in selling America to the Muslim world have produced a somewhat deeper awareness of Muslim sales resistance” (Ibid., pp. 117-118).

Similarly, other scholars have argued that it is not the failure of modernization to take hold in the Muslim world that has given rise to extreme trends of violence and terrorism, or even in the emergence of Islamically-oriented political parties. Aydin (2004) observes that “even in the case of the recent mobilization of Islam for politics, which reinforces the criticism of Westernization, its underlying cause was neither the failure of modernity to take hold nor a clash of civilizations”. Ahmad (2008) opines that “Islam’s response to modernity created a viable democratic Muslim model of political participation which involved women’s rights, minority rights and human rights” (pp. 135-136). Lewis’s What Went Wrong?, therefore, does not offer a concrete analysis of what has been going on in the Muslim world beyond the assertion that things went wrong in a supposedly unitary Muslim world—even though Lewis relies heavily on Ottoman history and projects it to the wider and diverse Muslim world and to disparate experiences anachronistically—as opposed to the West where things went right (Aydin, 2004; Sheehi, 2004: 2, 7-8).

Lewis’s formulation of the question that way has political implications. By presenting an image of a decaying Islamic civilization, Lewis seeks to divert attention from the criticism of American policies towards the Arab world and other Muslim countries, and to legitimize the war which becomes in this sense the burden of the
modern West; the medicine that shall be administered to this moribund civilization so as to bring it to the sphere of modernity.

Esposito (2002b) observes that Islam does not conflict with modernity and modernization. The belief that Muslims have to “choose between Mecca and mechanization” and the idea of the “inherent conflict between Islam and modernization” have “arisen when modernization is equated with the Westernization and secularization of society”. Esposito explains that modernization does not have to mean wholesale Westernization, a situation, he opines, clearly demonstrated by the Islamist activists (p. 64). Those activists, according to Esposito, “are continuing the process of Islamic modernization and reform” (p. 65). Islamic reformist thought, Esposito maintains, is a diverse phenomenon found in the Muslim-majority countries as well as among Muslim intellectuals in Europe and America (pp. 66-67). Islam’s encounter with modernity, in Esposito’s view, is not one of conflict; the distinction in Islamic modernist thought is made between “Islam’s immutable revelation and its mutable forms and institutions” (1982: 419); in addition, while Westernization is not upheld wholesale, modernization is not rejected (Ibid., p. 418). Regarding the Islamists, Esposito opines that they “did not simply retreat to the past but instead provided Islamic responses, ideological and organizational, to modern society… In a very real sense they modernized Islam by providing a modern interpretation or reformulation of Islam to revitalize the community religiously and socio-politically” (1999: 130). According to Esposito, although Islamists are “hostile to Westernization, they were not against modernization” as their message “was clearly written for a twentieth-century audience”. It addresses “the problem of modernity, analyzing the relationship of Islam to nationalism, democracy, capitalism, Marxism, modern
banking, education, law, women and work, Zionism, and international relations” (Ibid., p. 131). Esposito (2002a) puts forth the same argument.

Esposito (2010) even addresses this issue in relation to the facile representations, the “clichés which stigmatize the whole of Islam as fundamentalist, ideological, monolithic, static, unidimensional, implacably opposed to modernity, incapable of integration or assimilation, impervious to new ideas, retrogressive, retrograde, backward, archaic, medieval …” He comments, “I have to say that I don’t know a single Muslim who embodies even one of these characteristics, and I have Muslim friends and colleagues in all walks of life and from many cultures all over the globe” (p. 27). Esposito observes that the problem is not the lack of modernization or reformist thinkers, but in ignoring these voices and obscuring them by focusing on the “hard-line clerics and terrorists who receive a disproportionate amount of coverage” (p. 93). Those “Muslim voices of reform, scholars (ulema and lay intellectuals), the “Martin Luthers” and televangelists, the “Billy Grahams” represent a diverse collection of Muslims: men and women, laity and clergy, professionals, scholars, and popular preachers. Their audiences extend from North Africa to the Gulf States, South to Central and Southeast Asia, and Europe to America” (p. 93). Esposito (2010) breaks new grounds in the treatment of Islamic reformist thought, fully informed by the current orientations and diverse settings in which those reformers function. He deals with a hitherto neglected area in Western scholarship. Esposito concludes that the “fundamental problem for development and long-term stability in the Arab and Muslim worlds is not the religion of Islam or Islamic movements but the struggle between authoritarianism and pluralism” (Ibid., p. 196).
The two trends treated above start from diametrically opposed hypotheses to reach completely different conclusions. The differences between them are entrenched in their respective conceptualizations of the politics of knowledge and its teleology. The Orientalist approach is based on a selective reading of history, decontextualization of events, developments and phenomena, lumping together diverse experiences and movements, and presenting a monolithic distorted view of Islam which is interpolated into—and invoked to explain—the collective and individual behavior of Muslims at every turn. This trend also has ready tools of explanation: a clash of civilizations, an “Islamic threat,” an Islamic essence, in addition to stereotypical views. Proponents of this trend proceed from binary oppositions of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ with the ‘us’ as the yardstick for judging the ‘them’. The political implication for that depiction springs to the surface in that discourse and is expressed quite explicitly at times. More often, however, it is implied.

The other trend, by contrast, adopts social science tools and discards facile representations and vulgar stereotypes. It contextualizes the diverse phenomena in their immediate and broader contexts. It also adopts an open definition of modernization and development. Rather than emphasizing a clash of civilizations, MESA scholars envision space for interaction and dialogue. They are also able, to a great extent, to transcend the ethnocentric view in which the essentialists are implicated.

Conceptualizations of National Interest: Two Vying Outlooks

The term ‘national interest’ “connotes a selfish and unprincipled, or at least amoral approach” to the conduct of foreign policy, observes Tillman (1982: 43). It implies an exclusive concern for the geopolitical and economic advantages of a
particular nation without regard for morality, law and the welfare of others as long as these are not conducive to the fulfillment of the interests of that particular nation. This view of the ‘national interest’ is well summarized by Lord Palmerston’s dictum that England had neither “eternal allies” nor “perpetual enemies,” but only “eternal and perpetual” interests (Ibid., p. 43). Palmerston’s idea of what constitutes ‘national interest’ is stated in purely rational terms, characteristic of modernity. Such a rational approach does form a central factor in conducting foreign relations in modern politics. Nonetheless, contrary to the much held opinion, it is not the only factor. There is always room for a gamut of other factors in defining ‘national interest’ and even in conducting foreign policy. There is first the moral dimension which cannot be dismissed easily from analysis. According to Tillman (1982), this encompasses principled behavior, respect for the law, loyalty to friends and commitments, ethical imperatives, ethical restraints, in addition to the pursuit of geopolitical and economic advantages (Ibid., p. 43).

In the context of the United States where many interest groups flourish and are actively involved in the navigation of American policy in a course favorable to the groups they represent, the situation becomes more complicated. In the democratic system of the United States, statesmen take into account the public opinion and the reaction of the electorate. As the United States is a multiethnic and multi-cultural society with a number of interest groups functioning legally in the American civil society, American policy-makers have also to take into consideration the reaction of those interest groups depending on the latter’s power and leverage in the domestic scene. Policy-makers are thus further constrained by such domestic groups, especially when such groups are powerful. And this has implications for defining national
interests and conducting policy towards issues of interest to the group in question. In
the context of dealing with the Zionist lobby in the United States, Tillman observes,

The national interest is *greater* than the sum of group interests within the
country, but it is not, and cannot be, something wholly *different* from
these. It cannot be antithetical to the strong preferences of large numbers
of the nation's citizens. Just as groups and individuals owe their primary
loyalty to the community as a whole, the nation in turn owes a loyalty to
groups within it. (p. 54; emphasis in the original)

National prestige and the incorporation of values also play a part in the
conceptualization of ‘national interests’. This is especially relevant in the case of the
superpowers. Values are often upheld with a messianic spirit, and are always used to
justify policies and provide rationales for pursuing a particular line of policy. Cultural
symbols and traditions, affinities and shared experiences inform to some extent ideas
of what constitutes the ‘national interest’. All these factors intermingle and come to
bear upon the principal component of national interest; i.e. ensuring the protection and
preservation of the policies and relations that serve the well-being of the nation in
question.

In the case of a superpower, national interest dovetails neatly with the
accumulation and exercise of power, which doubles into playing a hegemonic role
vis-à-vis other nations. Moral values are often invoked to justify hegemony and
imperial practices: the European colonial powers adopted the rhetoric of the
“civilizing mission” and spreading modernity; the Soviet Union drew heavily on the
proletariat revolution and empowering the underprivileged classes; and the United
States has stressed modernization and, more recently, democratization. In fact, the
United States has a long tradition of a sense of a messianic spirit and a vision of
spreading the American ideal in a global scale for the benefit of the whole world. This

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sense of an altruistic mission is rooted in American tradition since the early days of the republic (Marr, 2006: 9).

The fabled benevolence of the United States is succinctly summarized by a former Minister of State at the British Foreign Office, Richard Law, who remarks that Americans believe “that the United States stands for something in the world—something of which the world has need, something which the world is going to like, something, in the final analysis, which the world is going to take, whether it likes it or not” (as quoted in Chomsky, 1999: 66). The task of the intelligentsia is to conceal these facts by proliferating discourses about the benevolence of America’s mission and its noble purposes (Ibid., p. 66). When experts disagree with the government, they disagree on the means, but do not question the underlying frames and goals. In fact, there is a remarkable degree of uniformity regarding these goals. Values, therefore, constitute an integral part of the sense of Americanness. Some of these values stem from worldly and secular (political and economic) outlook such as democracy, human rights, pluralism, freedom of speech, free market economy, capitalism, etc. Others derive from religio-cultural traditions. This last category is restricted to certain nations with which the United States shares historical experiences and traditions, such as Israel. Especially important in the case of Israel is the role of the Judeo-Christian tradition which is well-established in American consciousness.

According to Nye (1999), national interest “is broader than strategic interests, though they are part of it”. It can encompass values such as democracy and human rights “if the public feels that those values are so important to its identity that it is willing to pay a price to promote them.” Nye asserts that the American people clearly think that certain values and their promotion abroad constitute an integral part of their
interests. In a democracy, the definition of national interest rejects the distinction between “a morally-based and an interest-based foreign policy”. Moreover, moral values comprise “intangible interests”. Although policy-makers and experts may calculate the costs of indulging those values, they cannot deny the legitimacy of public opinion (pp. 23-24).

Clearly experts and strategists manipulate the American people’s awareness of the relevance of their values in the making of foreign policy and channel it in a manner serviceable to American hegemony; and thus pursue imperialist policies in the name of the American people. Values become a source of “soft power,” inseparable from the package of military hegemony which Nye defines as “hard power” (Nye, 1990: 170; Nye, 2003a: 74; Nye, 2004a: x; Nye, 2004b: 18). The definition of national interest is interrelated to the question of power, and by extension to hegemony and imperialism, “Our values are significant sources of soft power. Both hard and soft power remain vital, but in the information age soft power is becoming more compelling than ever before” (Nye, 1999: 25). Nye explicitly states that commonsense and discretion cannot determine the national interest. Fusing “American values and goals” into American power will bring about better consequences for American hegemony, while “interests are rationally pursued within prudent limits” (Ibid., p. 35).

Thus, intervention is presented in humanitarian terms, and exercising massive military action is shrouded in a discourse of defending freedom and human rights as well as making the world a safer place. As Hippler (1994) observes, good ideas and principles are utilized for destructive strategies and harmful consequences (p. 194). The buttressing discourse of imperialism and hegemony is also enforced in the
domestic level by the complying media whose covering also involves a great deal of covering up. The result is that the “doctrine of “good intentions” is beyond challenge, even beyond awareness—at least at home” (Chomsky 1999: 65).

Lockman (2004a) puts forth the same argument as Nye’s with reference to American policy towards the Arab world. He warns the American policy-makers that something more than the reckless exercise of power is involved,

While a generalized arrogance of power may well often lead to miscalculation and failure, there are always specific understandings of the world also at work, particular forms of knowledge which can lead to a distorted grasp of reality and unexpected (often disastrous) consequences. (p. 270)

Lockman observes that the definition of American interests in the Arab world “is itself a question of differing, indeed conflicting, perceptions and agendas” (p. 270). Debates on the definition of national interest and how to conduct policy accordingly are not merely “academic exercises” and exchanges on the pages of prestigious journals, and end there. Rather, “they take place within, and are influenced by, broader contexts, and they can have real-world consequences” as the debates on the “Islamic threat” and how to respond to the events of 9/11 have demonstrated (Ibid., pp. 270-271).

Nye’s obsession with the question of “soft power” over the last two decades is revealing. He introduced the term in 1990, with the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower following the disintegration of the USSR. This is not a mere coincidence. Concern about the rise of Asian powers such as Japan and China as well as the restrictions imposed by the great powers through international organizations necessitate a milder form of exercising power and securing hegemony.
As far as the Arab world, Iran and Israel are concerned, the debate on what constitutes and serves American interests in relation to these countries is relatively recent. It breaks into the open in the wake of the Cold War as American intervention in the Arab countries increased and some of America’s allies especially Israel lost their strategic value. In the post-Cold War unipolar order, two vying trends in the United States sought to steer American policy towards the region in two antithetical courses, based on conflicting definitions of what constitutes and perpetuates American interests. The first trend is represented by pro-Israel scholars who take into account the primacy of keeping the American support for Israel intact and seek to steer American policy towards the region in a way that favors Israel. The other trend comprises MESA scholars and other academic realists outside the field of Middle East studies. These scholars advocate a balanced position that, while dedicated to the support of Israel, seeks to steer policy in a way that does not antagonize the Arabs or harm America’s image in the Arab countries.

The end of the Cold War and the commencement of the New World Order was a watershed in the American scholars’ treatment of the role that the United States had to play in the region. It polarized debates on a series of issues including democratization, power relations, pluralism, the “Islamic threat,” violence, and above all the implication for foreign-policy making. These debates are overtly political and their ultimate end point is informing the policymaking community of what serves American interests and consequently how to conduct policy towards the region. Gerges (2003) remarks that security interests and strategic considerations, not merely ideology and culture, account for the obsession with indigenous movements in the Arab world (p. 73).
The ideologically-motivated partisan scholars formulated a conception of American interests based on the relative power of the United States and the Arab and other Muslim countries. The fact that the United States is in a position that allows it to spread its influence without facing much difficulty induces the partisan scholars to adopt a hard-line approach in defining American interests. The aim is no less than reshaping the region in a way that serves Israel’s long-term interests, a view fully articulated in Shimon Perez’s *The New Middle East* (1994). These scholars conceal their pro-Israel attitudes in a larger caveat of American interests. The main pillar in their conception of American interests is the unique position of the United States in the global arena, which endows it with a historical opportunity in reshaping the region in its own image.

The position of these scholars converges with and fuses into the neo-conservative crucible which maintains a military vision of securing and expanding American hegemony. Condoleezza Rice (2000) observes that American foreign policy should proceed from “recognizing that the United States is in a remarkable position” (p. 45), and “is blessed with an extraordinary opportunity”. The United States, Rice states, “has had no territorial ambitions for nearly a century. Its national interest has been defined instead by a desire to foster the spread of freedom, prosperity, and peace”. Rice implies that imperial conquest is as essential to the United States as other traditional means, and the task of the American administration is to bridge the gap between expansive “possibilities” and the “realities” of restricted intervention (p. 62). Rice underscores the military factor in expanding U.S. influence globally. With regard to the Arab world, deterrence amalgamates to regime change and broader involvement so as to get rid of the “difficulties” in “a region of core interest to the United States
and to our key ally Israel… [which] has a real security problem” (p. 61). Rice brings in values into the conception of national interest. She maintains that values such as human rights and democracy cannot be separated from power politics. To separate them is “a disaster for American foreign policy,” the more so as “American values are universal” (p. 49). In other words, those values provide a moral justification for hegemonic policies and a discursive reservoir through which such policies are projected.

The ideologically-oriented scholars have advocated a policy of interventionist imperialism in the course of the last two decades, embedded in a sense of what Rice refers to as “an extraordinary opportunity.” Bernard Lewis especially harps on this idea: “now for the first time ever there is only one superpower with overwhelming strength and no rival to challenge its power or will in the Middle East or nowhere else” (1992: 106-107). To Lewis as to his protégés, all that the United States does in the Arab and Muslim worlds does not fit the category of imperialism. Lewis bemoans what he regards as American “inaction” in the region that, in his view, had empowered state and non-state actors to rise against the United States and threaten its interests. These interests may further be threatened, Lewis warns, by a “resurgent Russia” or a “superpower China” if the Americans would continue in their “inaction”. However, Lewis states reassuringly, “there is no present external threat” (Lewis, 2004: 350). These remarks are charged with imperialist overtones, urging the United States to broaden its imperialist involvement in the Arab world. Imperialism is naturalized to the extent that it is presented as the natural order of things; if the United States refrains from practicing a more blatant form of imperialism, other powers will not. The imperialist ethos is the central factor in Lewis’s approach; he has no concern
for the peoples of the Arab countries as these, in the final analysis, can be easily subjected. The motivating and determining factor of Lewis’s ideas is his Zionist ideology and concern for Israeli dominance. Lewis insinuates that failing to remove Saddam in 1991 was inappropriate as it consolidated the sense of American weakness in the Arab countries. There are other factors involved in Lewis’s obsession with removing Saddam, which do not figure in his argument; namely, the urge to remove Saddam since that is an Israeli priority. This is evidenced by the constant shifting of argument for removing Saddam, each time bringing new reasons so as to make the argument convincing and to inflate the threat Saddam supposedly posed to the United States. The real concern, however, is not clearly stated in Lewis’s argument. “Imperial rule,” Lewis asserts, “may bring peace and order — the prototype is Pax Romana”; so, why not a Pax Americana at present, also for bringing “peace and order”? Lewis weaves this argument into a discussion of power and national interests, especially securing the uninterrupted flow of oil. He argues that only the United States is equipped to play this role, not through diplomacy and other means but by assuming an imperial role. Lewis presents this as the only alternative, either “get tough or get out” (2004).

In a similar vein, in 1991, Lewis stated that for “the first time ever, there is only one power, with overwhelming wealth and strength, and no real rival to challenge it.” Yet, Lewis adds that America has “no taste or desire for imperial expansion or domination,” nor do Americans wish to fight for imperial interests in the way “the Englishmen, Frenchmen and Dutchmen” did before them (2004: 357-358). The discursive strategy here is twofold: on the one hand, Lewis provides a justification for the massive destruction and killing perpetrated by the United States in
the first Gulf War (1991) to convince the American public that the United States is not a self-interested imperial power; on the other hand, there are implicit gestures for the statesmen to expand the domain and nature of U.S. imperialism. Both points go side by side; and their glaring contradiction is thinly concealed in apologia and presenting the United States as being pushed into more involvement by the threatening and aggressive actions of the Arab troublemakers. America is portrayed on the defensive position. Hence, as it is endowed with unrivalled power, it has to protect its interest by assuming an imperial role and resort to force. Lewis observes that the “only serious restraint on American power is American public opinion” (2004: 358). Lewis (1992) makes this same point: “the only serious restraint on the American administration is American public opinion” (p. 108). The same argument concerning American public opinion as the sole restraint on American imperialism also recurs in Lewis (1994: 162; 2001a, November 19; 2003a: 57). This challenge, however, is not an insurmountable one. Policy-makers, supported by the beltway intellectuals and experts have to channel public opinion in a certain direction through a discourse of deceit. And this is what Lewis does.

The emphasis on confrontation by Lewis, Pipes and Kramer, among other like-minded experts and lobbyists, occurs within the scope of the conceptualization of power and the advancement of American interests. By framing their ideas in a parlance of an “Islamic threat,” a “clash of civilizations,” ceaseless confrontation and a tidal wave of Muslim hatred of and rage against the West, and the United States in particular, as well as the depiction of an indiscriminate resort to terrorism by Muslims, these authors bring in the question of national interest directly and indirectly into their discourse. Pipes (in Pelletreau, et al., 1994) views all Islamists, peaceful and
radical, as a threat to American interests and security, “all of them are inherently extremist and all despise our civilization. They despise us not for what we do but for who we are” (p. 6). In their view, the national interest and security of the United States and of the West in general would be best served by isolating unfriendly regimes and by massive military campaigns, if necessary. In addition to their writings, they also lobby the legislative and executive branches of the government for forwarding such a policy. Thus, they at once provide the intellectual justifications for military action and participate in various activities to realize it on the ground.

As Lewis is more profound than Pipes and Kramer, his ideas of what comprises national interest do not flow explicitly on the surface. He often hints at such matters implicitly. Lewis is an equivocal writer; only a profound reading that connects the various threads and thematic of his argument together and examines his use of language would capture his intents and underlying messages which usually lie beneath an aura of erudition and quibbling.

The critiques of MESA that are mounted by Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer among others seek to enforce a standard conception of national interest. One of the primary concerns of Kramer (2001) is the irrelevance of Middle East studies as represented by MESA to the American government. According to Kramer, Middle East studies have missed the mark, turned to an apologetic mouthpiece for Islamist activism and terrorism, and hence ceased to serve American interests. Kramer states that MESA experts have become “useless in the effort to define and advance American interests” (Kramer, 2001: 96). Kramer maintains that the clout of the think tanks stems from adopting a position that dovetails with the accepted public discourse of the national interest, whereas only a few academics knew to present their ideas in
the name of national interest. However, the ideas and approaches of these few scholars “turned out to be substantively wrong” (Ibid., p. 107). Kramer states that Middle East studies are irrelevant to the interests of the United States, and that for MESA to claim that its expertise is relevant to the American interest is “absurd”. The “last thing Middle Eastern studies have sought to do this last quarter-century has been to serve American foreign policy or private initiative” (Ibid., p. 126). The establishment of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) by Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami to counterpoise the influence of MESA in the academic community is also partly a chapter in the quarrel for defining the priorities of the United States and the content of its policies towards the region.

The central component in the definition of the American interest in the region as articulated by the ideologically-partisan scholars is the perpetuation of American support for Israel and guaranteeing the latter’s unrivalled regional hegemony. In this regard they advance two parallel arguments: the one based on values and the other on the geopolitical strategic value of Israel. The moral argument was reasserted in the early 1990s due to the sense of an increasing decline in Israel’s strategic value to the United States in the post-Cold War era. In this case, images of a Judeo-Christian tradition, past Jewish victimhood, shared experiences, a special relationship, and supporting a fellow democracy beset and threatened by an ocean of dictatorships are often invoked. This even goes further to appeals for honoring friendship. Lewis reminds the American policy-makers, quoting a medieval Arab author, “He who befriends and advances friend and enemy alike will only arouse distaste for his friendship and contempt for his enmity. He will earn the scorn of his enemy, and facilitate his hostile designs; he will lose his friend, who will join the ranks of his
enemies” (1992: 111). Lewis’s depiction of the Arabs as the enemies of the United States without supporting his position is part of finding a place for Israel in a changing situation.

The search for a new strategic role for Israel was vigorously undertaken. Partisan scholars emphasize the notion that American and Israeli interests are more or less identical. Both the U.S. and Israel face the same enemies and are threatened by the same forces. Here it may be added that these authors’ idea of “Arab exceptionalism” has a policy dimension that includes the definition of American interests. These scholars part company with their fellow neo-conservatives regarding the feasibility and usefulness of adopting a discourse of democratization, though in the final analysis they converge in their view of the American role in the region. To these scholars, democratization is a threat to U.S. interests as it is likely to bring what they see as hostile forces, especially the Islamists, to power; and hence endanger U.S. interests. A closer look, however, reveals that such ideas are monopolized discursively due to their indoctrinating appeal. The fact is that the problem is not merely the Islamists, though they may be part of it. Rather, it is the emergence of democratically elected governments of whatever orientation (Islamist or otherwise) that would be accountable to the peoples and hence would have to redefine their relations with the hegemonic powers, thereby affecting American interests in one way or another. The United States has a record of overthrowing democratically elected governments, all of them secular, both in the region and elsewhere and replacing them with dictatorial regimes. A familiar example of this is the overthrow of the Mosaddeq government in Iran in 1953 and supporting the Shah. The difference on the discursive level, therefore, is not a division of ideas as much as a division of labor. Policy-
makers feel constrained to adopt a diplomatic language to sell their policies both
domestically and internationally. They also present this as part of the American global
project which is depicted as humanitarian and altruistic in nature. On the other hand,
the scholars, whose task is to indoctrinate the public and steer policy in a certain
direction, do not have to make such concessions except when these enforce their
agenda.

Thus, the Orientalists do not incorporate such values as democracy and human
rights in the Arab context. Indeed, they oppose them. They invoke them only as a
discursive strategy when appealing to those values advances their factional interests.
For example, they oppose the MESA scholars’ model of democratization of the Arab
world; yet, when such rhetoric invigorates their partisan position, they readily change
course. During the 1990s they engaged in a prolonged debate against democratization,
ironically provoked by Bernard Lewis’s insinuations of the incompatibility of Islam
and democracy in “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (1990). The founder of WINEP,
Martin Indyk, argues that the United States should not encourage democracy in
countries friendly to Washington like Egypt and Jordan, and that political
participation should be restricted to secular parties (Beinin, 2003a). Similarly, Lewis
in slow stages” (p. 218). Pipes (in Pelletreau, et al., 1994) observes that in the context
of the Arab world, democracy, understood as elections, would result in bringing “anti-
democratic forces” to power. Hence, an appropriate policy would be “first peace, then
civil society, then elections” (p. 8). He revisited this idea constantly. Pipes (2002)
asserts that elections are the “capstone” and “finale” in the process of democratization
(p. 51), and that “the overriding goal of U.S. policy must be to keep Islamists from seizing power” (Ibid., p. 49).

Yet, with the Bush administration declaration of the “war on terrorism,” they shifted ground and argued that a primary aim of the war is democratization. This position became even more pronounced in regards to Iraq. Lewis especially became exceptionally vociferous and outspoken in this respect. In a lecture at Harvard University he even chastised scholars who maintain the idea that democratization could not flourish in the Arab context. However, the Arabs are not mature enough to do that themselves; only “with some guidance” can they get on that track (Lewis, as quoted by Waldman, 2004), which in the final analysis means American forces in their midst maintaining order and guarding democracy. Khalidi (2004) doubts “whether there was any real substance or meaning to the slogan “democratization” that was freely bandied about” by the neo-conservative pundits who “had evidently adopted it opportunistically,” given the fact that they “had never before been known for their concern” for democracy in the Arab world (pp. 39-40). The position of these pundits and policy-makers is laid bare in rare moments of frankness. Former Secretary of Defense and CIA chief James Schlesinger once asked: do “we seriously desire to prescribe democracy as the proper form of government for other societies[?]” Perhaps the issue is most clearly posed in the Islamic world. Do we seriously want to change the institutions in Saudi Arabia?” Schlesinger heads off any potential affirmative, allowing nothing to chance: “The brief answer is no: over the years we have sought to preserve those institutions, sometimes in preference to more democratic forces coursing throughout the region” (quoted by Sadowsky, 1997: 33). Indeed, the discourse of opposing democratization that these scholars adopt is
consistent with the “long-standing U.S. strategy” (Hadar, 1992). The aim of their shift is to manufacture consent and sell out the war. Similarly, Chomsky (2002) observes that “only by looking closely at individual cases that one can appreciate the depth of the fear and hatred of democracy in [American] elite circles” (p. 109).

Discussions of the American interest were revitalized in the aftermath of the second Gulf War with the publication of Mearsheimer and Walt’s “The Israel Lobby” (2006) which they expanded in the following year into a book entitled *The Israel Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (2007). The title itself brings to mind the question of American interest. Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the policies advocated by the Israel lobby are antithetical to the American interest and are harmful to Israel’s interests as well (2007: viii). They argue that the Zionist lobby had successfully spread the notion that Israeli and American interests are identical whereas in reality they are not (Ibid., p. 8). Moreover, the authors maintain that the unconditional American support for Israel is also harmful to the American national interest (Ibid., p. 14). The article and the book dismantle the arguments made by lobby individuals and groups, regarding the moral obligation the United States owes towards Israel. They also challenge the conviction that Israel is a strategic asset to the United States; arguing that it had become “a strategic liability”. Even in such matters as fighting terrorism, American and Israeli interests are not identical (2007: 70), nor do Iran and Iraq pose a serious threat to the United States even if they acquire unconventional weapons (p. 71).

Kramer (2006b) responds to the Mearsheimer and Walt article by enforcing the same position dominant in the ranks of the lobby. To Kramer, concerning uncritical American support for Israel, the Holocaust and democracy arguments are
“more than sufficient for the vast majority of Americans.” Besides these moral arguments, which Kramer sees as essential to U.S. support for Israel, he argues that Israel is a vital American asset as it preserves the “pax Americana in the Eastern Mediterranean.” Kramer concedes that Israel has not been helpful in the Persian Gulf, and that instability in the Gulf region is due to the absence of an equivalent of Israel there. In fact, America’s most important interest in the Arab world as a whole is the access to Gulf oil, while the Eastern Mediterranean is a backwater as far as American interests are concerned. Again Kramer dwells on the argument that American and Israeli interests are inevitably identical in such issues as terrorism and the Iranian nuclear capability. In short, Kramer adds nothing new to the conventional argument. He concludes that the “arguments for supporting Israel are many and varied, and no one argument is decisive. Morality- and value-based arguments are crucial, but a compelling realist argument can be made for viewing Israel as an asset to the West.” Kramer’s argument reflects the crisis in the Zionist ideology and its awkwardness as well as the little choices left to it. The mere reiteration of the old arguments which had lost their credibility is instructive of that crisis. Although Kramer attempts to frame his argument from the vantage point of American interests, the weakness of his position in this particular perspective is clearly revealed in his attempt to find other ways of securing a place for Israel as an agent for the United States. This weakness is further reflected in the resort to the moral argument which is after all irrelevant in the discussion of the topic of American interests, especially in the context of a response to a proposition that proceeds from a realist approach. To dismiss a realistic approach by an unrealistic argument is an indication of the vigor of the realistic argument. In sum, the partisan scholars have constantly projected a conception of American interests in a way that assigns primacy to Israel rather than to America’s hegemonic interests. Their
functioning within the ranks of the neo-conservative guild facilitates their task and lends credence to it.

While the ideological partisans are preoccupied with Israel’s short- and long-term gains, the MESA scholars focus on the American long-term interests, particularly oil. The security of Israel figures in their analysis, but they do not see it as particularly threatened. These scholars believe that an aggressive American policy is antithetical to American interests, while some of them such as Lockman, Beinin and Khalidi are opposed to imperialism in principle. To this trend, the sum of American interest is more than the overthrow of regimes and posturing of American military prowess that tend to achieve short-term results but are harmful in the long run. Guarding American interests, therefore, requires a balanced policy that involves engagement and living up to America’s ideals of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. The American double standard policies and lack of evenhandedness are also viewed as endangering American interests.

The rise of Islamist political parties in many Arab and other Muslim-majority countries has been a challenge to the proclaimed American ideal of pluralism. While suspicious of the Islamists’ intents, many MESA scholars advocate a real process of democratization. The remarkable focus on Islamist activism and democratization can be understood in relation to their implication for American interests. The risks that are involved are weighed against the long-term results. Esposito and Voll (1996) observe that resorting “to past patterns of repression, whatever its apparent short-term gains, will only contribute to further radicalization and long-term instability” (p. 191). Gerges (1999) opines that it is in America’s long-term interest to distance itself from supporting corrupt and unpopular regimes in the Muslim world (p. 241). Esposito (in
Pelletreau, et al., 1994) opines that risk-free democracy is a formidable and unrealistic choice. Although the outcomes of democratization are unpredictable, the short-term risks should be balanced against the consequences in the long run (p. 11). The effective measure to prevent such consequences, a lesson learned from the U.S. attitude towards the Shah’s Iran and the subsequent Iranian revolution, is accommodation rather than exclusion. The U.S. government should avoid ignoring the political legitimacy of various actors that oppose the regimes and defining popular political participation in a manner that antagonizes certain actors since that would lead in the long run to regional instability and radicalization of moderate elements, thereby affecting American interests negatively (Ibid., 12-13). As Esposito and Piscatori (1991) put it, the

West must walk a tightrope. On the one hand, if it encourages local governments to thwart moves toward greater participation out of the fear that a greater degree of Islamic self-expression will adversely affect Western clients and interests, it runs the risk of being insensitive to trends that may be in accord with its own long-term interests. The West also runs the risk of being accused of a hypocritical commitment to democratic ideals. (p. 440)

The adoption of an accommodationist approach is a pragmatic move to avoid tarnishing America’s image in the Arab countries. It occurs as a subcategory of the conceptualization of American interests. The democratization discourse is made possible by the rejection of essentialist notions such as “Arab exceptionalism”. Kazemi (1996) remarks that “Middle Eastern exceptionalism” cannot account for the debacle of democracy in the region; whenever it is invoked to account for the persistence of autocratic rule and authoritarian politics, it arouses a “sense of unease” (p. 153). Similarly, Norton (1993) states that “the time has come to stop talking about Middle Eastern exceptionalism” when experts on the Arab and Muslim worlds “discuss global trends” (p. 216).
However, the humanitarian impulse that is sensed in the writings of the MESA scholars is restricted. According to Esposito (1999), the United States shall be willing to demonstrate “by word and action” that it lives up to the ideals of pluralism, democracy and self-determination even if that means accepting different viewpoints so long as these reflect the will of the peoples and do not “directly threaten U.S. interests” (p. 274). Thus, values and the rights of the Arab peoples are subverted to American interests. The two are interrelated: if popular will is met but American interests are threatened, then the United States must reverse course. To Esposito, pluralism and opening up the political system can be serviceable to American interests since such a move would foster the growth of diverse voices and hence weaken the Islamists’ monopoly of opposition voters. Besides, it would also reform the ideology of the Islamist parties (1999: 288; Pelletreau, et al., 1994: 13). Evidently, MESA scholars, as Gerges (1999) remarks, are not radical ideologues. Rather, they approach Islamist activism from a pragmatic perspective. Their criticism of the dominant discourse on Islamist activism “is informed more by pragmatic concerns and calculations than by any romantic fascination or deference to Muslims.” Their approach is oriented towards the preservation of American interests in the long run. In this context, their policy recommendations “are anchored in political realities rather than in sentiments” (p. 33).

In the context of the “war on terrorism,” MESA scholars place as much emphasis on dialogue and engagement as on the military campaign, especially as that war continues and goes indiscriminately beyond al-Qaeda. While they see the war on terror as a necessary battle imposed upon the United States which had no other choice but to fight, they maintain that war is not the only way to thwart and defeat terrorism.

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The struggle, in their conception, is not an existential one between two clashing civilizations. Rather, it is a war against a dissident violent group within “Islam,” not representative of the whole spectrum of Muslims. Hence, the American interest requires the use of “soft power” as well. They view the “war on terrorism” as equally a battle for hearts and minds. Esposito and Mogahed (2008b) write, “winning hearts and minds … is the key to any victory over global terrorism.” In this view, engagement and public diplomacy are essential prerequisites for improving America’s image in the Muslim world.

Similarly, commenting on the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, Cole (2009) observes,

The U.S. public, deprived by its government and much of the mass media of an accurate view of the situation on the ground with regard to civilian deaths and suffering, remained largely unaware of the magnitude of the catastrophe provoked in our name. The rest of the world wore no similar blinkers, and American prestige sank. (p. 150)

The military option, according to Cole, is “a huge disappointment” (Ibid., p. 150) as it endangers the energy exports. The exclusive reliance on military power harms and endangers American interests. The situation of insecurity created by the war on Iraq and the continuation of the containment of Iran hinder U.S. firms from operating in both countries, and potentially open the way to Russian, Chinese, Indian and European companies. To preserve American interests, the new president “has an opportunity to abandon “containment” as a goal and turn instead to engagement” (Ibid., p. 151). Furthermore, the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq would give the United States “greater clout and options, since it will no longer be bogged down” (Ibid., p. 154). Cole’s criticism of the policies of the successive American administrations since Bush Sr. stems from his conception of the American interest.
Dual containment that was pursued by the Clinton administrations was, according to Cole, antithetical to American interests, while it served those of Israel. “Obviously, Israeli security was on Indyk’s mind as he pressed his unrealistic idea on Washington” (Ibid., p. 20).

Cole adopts a realistic approach to American interests. The principal American interest in the region is oil, and the increasing—rather than decreasing—American dependency on it in a world of competing “energy hogs,” in addition to the absence of an energy alternative, pose restrictions on the choices of the United States. Hence, if the U.S. continues its aggressive policy, it will alienate the Muslim world which might turn to other less aggressive powers (Ibid., pp. 34-35), in which case the United States could end up out of the game, “and would thereby lose its status as a superpower” (Ibid., pp. 29-30). Cole blows the danger siren, “Petroleum makes the world go round, which means that, increasingly, Muslims will make the world go round. This maxim will probably remain true at least in the medium term, but very possibly even through 2050” (Ibid., p. 34). “Enormous dangers” lie ahead for the industrial West if it continues in the oppressive path. The West, therefore, must guard against “the temptation to meddle” and “neomercantilism” (Ibid., p. 34) as well as the unconditional U.S. support for Israel while continuing to disregard Palestinian aspirations (Ibid., p. 36).

Esposito (2010) adopts a similar stance regarding the American support for Israel. “While nothing should compromise America’s commitment to the existence and security of Israel, America’s national interests and credibility not only in the Arab and Muslim worlds but also internationally depend on [America’s] ability to be more
evenhanded”. The United States, Esposito concludes, should condemn both Palestinian and Israeli terrorism and take a “tough stand” towards both (p. 192).

From the standpoint of MESA academics, American interests are best served by engagement rather than harsh rhetoric and domineering attitudes. The scope of engagement is broadened to include state and non-state actors. These include the Islamist parties which Cole regards as assets rather than a danger since they occupy “the space that al-Qaeda might otherwise fill” and hence act as barriers to radicalism (2009: 78).

Aggressive American policy and the ideologically-motivated views of the neo-conservatives are regarded as the real threat to American interests. This is categorically stated by Cole (2009). The extent to which Cole lays the blame on the neo-conservatives is reflected in his harsh language:

"[t]he message of the right-wing pundits and pastors and politicians is that Muslims form a menace to the West unless they are subdued and dominated. In that sense, the military occupation of Iraq that began in 2003 exemplifies the mind-set of American hawks. This policy of confrontation and, frankly, of neocolonialism poses the direst of dangers for the United States and for the world. It is a policy for the most part pushed by the ignorant and the greedy, the ambitious, or the paranoid. It is a policy issuing from the darkest corners of the American and European soul. These militant attitudes and the constant demonization of others—mirrored against the West in radical states in the Middle East—have ratcheted up conflict between the West and the Muslim world. (p. 2)

But the pressing question is what form of engagement is conceded and what its scope is, as well as the position of the Muslim world in relation to the West. Cole’s definition of engagement, which also applies to other MESA experts, is instructive:

By “engagement,” I do not mean surrender or accommodation. I mean critique as well as dialogue, pressure as well as basic human respect, sticks such as sanctions as well as carrots such as better diplomatic and
economic relations. I mean the demotion of military response from favored tool to last resort. (2009: 5)

Like Esposito, Cole calls for combining both hard power (sticks) and soft power (carrots). The superiority of the West, not merely in material advancement but also in human terms is taken for granted. Muslims cannot be accorded equal status in the conceded dialogue; they shall be assigned only “basic human respect”. Again like Esposito, he assigns a primary role to soft power over hard power, not excluding the latter, nonetheless (Esposito 2002a: 156). “Short-term policies that are necessitated by national interest must be balanced by long-term policies.” This would involve promoting democracy. Failing that would result in further radicalization and anti-Americanism (Ibid., pp. 156-157).

Bulliet (1999) warns against the continuation of American support for repressive regimes and the reversal of the democratic process as well as involvement in “the doctrinal politics of the world’s Islamic community.” He opines that the U.S. and the Muslim world should work on mutually constructive relationships” with the U.S. honoring pluralism abroad as it honors it at home for the sake of preserving American interests (p. 200). Esposito (2010) observes that persistence in stereotypical views that “all Muslims support terrorism, oppose democracy, and are atavistically opposed to freedom” runs against Western interests (p. x). Despite its limitations, the argument of these scholars makes a case for coexistence and understanding, albeit in American terms. Esposito states, “Unless we can learn to live together in a more just and rational way, we are unlikely to have a viable world to hand on to the next generation” (Ibid., p. xi). The case for coexistence is curtailed in scope due to assigning it only a secondary role after political considerations and obsession with American interests. Nonetheless, there is a positive side to this position that cannot be
denied or underestimated. In other words, hegemony is so predominant that it creates a formidable chasm to reach out to the ‘other’ and deal with them on a basis of equality. The imperial superiority is, thus, far from discarded. In fact, this trend embodies imperialism in its post-modern manifestation.

There is a sincere effort to go beyond hostile attitudes and facile representations, and to emphasize coexistence in a world that has come closer together to the extent that people in both the Muslim world and the West are no more living in separate secluded terrains. Bulliet (2004a) provides a provocative case for coexistence that almost transcends political exigencies to indulge the Muslim world and the West in a dialogue based on mutual understanding and tolerance. Both entities, Bulliet observes, cannot afford to continue on a path of mutual distrust and enmity, honed over by extremists in both sides. The present situation, Bulliet affirms, “must change” and “in the end, Muslims and non-Muslims of the West will live together” (Bulliet, 2004b). He concludes:

Islamo-Christian civilization has been a reality for centuries, though no one on either side has ever seen a good reason to admit it. Living physically separated by seas and armed frontiers, both sides felt free to indulge in warlike bombast. But we are no longer living apart. Today’s world cannot afford yesterday’s militancy, or the extension of that militancy into the indefinite future through a bombastic “war on terror.” (Ibid.)

Appreciation of the “twinned relationship” of the Muslim world and the West is crucial for both (Bulliet, 2004a: 45). This is exactly what is needed in today’s world. Tyler (2008) provides a blueprint for coexistence between the Muslim world and the West. Tyler argues that this has become a pressing demand due to a gamut of factors including societal and economic connectivity, migration and demographic fusion, and cultural interactions. “Learning to exist with the Muslim Other is now as
much a domestic question in the West as it is a global one” (p. 2). This would involve the elevation of a common discourse of Islamic and Western political philosophy and ethics and the search for ideological common ground between the Muslim world and the West (Ibid., p. 3). Saikal (2003) argues that there is much in common between the Muslim world and the West in terms of cooperation. Overshadowing that by recourse to confrontation is not productive to both sides.

American interests in the Arab world are defined as legitimate, even when that involves outright imperialism. The legitimacy of those interests takes two vying outlooks. The hardliner view not only legitimizes those interests, but also emphasizes imperialism in its military expansionist form as the unitary and legitimate way of materializing and preserving them. As Saikal (2003) observes, these scholars are motivated by their pro-Israel stance. Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes and like-minded pro-Israeli scholars and policy makers, argue that the Muslim world is awash in anti-Americanism that is emboldened in the acts of al-Qaeda to hit American interests since the U.S. and its allies had failed to act decisively against them and eradicate the threats to American interests. The only way to thwart the threat and preserve U.S. interests, and even expand them, is through recourse to military leverage, while at the same time obliterating altogether all the grievances of the Muslim peoples (pp. 132-133). This approach misuses history and presents an imperialist discourse that ultimately places Israel’s agenda as the ultimate point of reference in the formulation of ideas. Enveloping those ideas in the cloak of American interests is for the most part a discursive strategy to conceal the Zionist core of their argument.

MESA scholars favor a more benign way of preserving those interests. Their approach combines both hard and soft power to achieve those interests. It is a benign
form of imperialism. The legitimacy of those interests and the legitimacy of preserving them by all means, even military if necessary, are out of question. The legitimacy of the interests and the various means of achieving them are not problematized at all; yet, what is questioned is merely the excessive use of force that might harm those interests, and not the rights of Arab and Muslim peoples. The former trend weighs the gains of aggressive policies from an Israeli perspective first and American standpoint only afterwards, finding that the aggressive militant approach best serves Israeli interests. Proponents of this trend push with all their weight to materialize their approach and have succeeded in doing so due to the convergence of their partisan position with that of the neoconservatives. They urge for final solutions and radical approaches. MESA scholars, on the other hand, weigh American policy against the long-term American interests and conclude that the less aggressive that policy is, the more serviceable it is to American hegemony. These experts call for a less sharp endorsement of those interests and a moderate rhetoric in proclaiming them. They do not question the legitimacy itself; they merely look for alleviating the means of achieving those interests. Their sense of the need for dialogue is also for the most part hampered and caricatured by the grip of hegemony on their discourse and their view of the position of the Arab and Muslim worlds vis-à-vis the United States.