Islam and modernity

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Preventing Violent Protest Behaviour.
An Arab region perspective; A role for Europe?
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Dear Ladies, Sirs, your excellencies,

You are in luck today, because I am a lawyer. Had I been an anthropologist, historian or sociologist, I would have spend the next hour – and preferably the whole day – discussing the definition of 'modernity'. So, as a lawyer, maybe I should start with a disclaimer: I will discuss the concept of modernity with you this morning, but will avail myself of a definition that I find workable, but that may very well be irrelevant or even offending to my scholarly colleagues.

As the title of this plenary session implicitly suggests, the concepts of 'Islam' and 'Modernity' are considered anathema. The concept of modernity is usually appropriated by the West. Modernity *is* us. Opposing Modernity and Islam implies the incompatibility of Islam with the ways and values of our times or, more accurately, with *our* ways and *our* values. I tend to disagree with this assumption. The Muslims in the Arab world, with who I am more familiar, have a deep love-hate relationship with the West. The love is definitely with regards to modern technology, but also other values. The Arab Human Development Report of 2003, which is to be discussed by the next panellist, for instance indicated that democracy is definitely embraced by a majority in the Arab world. But this is where the hate comes in. The aversion towards the West is caused by the West taking the moral high ground, by advocating its own values as the only valid standards with disregard for any alternative. It is this alternative that is posed by Islam.

In this presentation I want to argue that Islam in its present political turmoil represents the epitome of modernity. But before we continue, we must make a clear distinction between modernity as a process, and the fruits of modernity. It is my contention that the developments of political Islam in the 20th century, but especially in the past thirty years, is a process of modernity *par excellence*. The products of this modernity, however, are different from 'our' Western historical experiences. This is a problem of conceptualisation often encountered among Westerners: we cannot perceive of social-political developments leading to different result than ours. But here we are, witnessing exactly that.

But first, what do we mean by 'modernity'? In the European eighteenth century experience, I find it can be characterized by the following three elements.

Revolutionary force:
First, it was a revolutionary force, for it aimed at replacing old value systems for new ones. The impatience with which this need was accompanied made it not a gradual change, but a revolt against the old order.

The same is happening with Islam, which is used as a rallying force against the present condition of most Muslim countries that are suffering from political oppression, corruption, nepotism and, more general, social-economical collapse. The heydays of socialism are over, and the present generations are trying to cope with debris of overpopulation, unemployment, and a collapse of the education and healthcare systems.

Under the banner of Islam, people are not only demanding changes, but they are actually proposing alternatives: the Islamic model. Fair enough, this model is oftentimes tantamount to a battle cry, a mere slogan. But for many it has concrete alternatives.

Reinforcing and new hope:
The European revolutionary force of modernity represented and reinforced a new hope for the future. It restored man to his humanity and to his responsibilities and propelled him into new age of hope, prosperity, progress. And rightly so: modernity has brought the West liberty and knowledge.

Just as the Europeans in the eighteenth century, Muslims also demand that their humanity be restored to them. The most powerful emotion that is driving this force of unrest and revolt is the feeling of exclusion and alienation. People want to be part of society, enter the labour market, participate in politics, get married. But everywhere they turn they walk into a brick wall. The young man who eagerly studies his way through (often free) university education, and graduates as an engineer or a doctor, is then confronted with unemployment and economical crisis. If he wants to get a job, he must invest in connections, corruption and bribery. If he wants to start his own company, he has to fight himself through the jungle of (again, often corrupt) bureaucracy in order to get all the permits, but even if he were to succeed he won't get a loan from the bank because credit is not extended to individuals. The lack of income will make it impossible for him to get married, since he cannot meet the requirements of providing the house and maintenance for his wife and children. If he then wants to ventilate his frustrations and complaints by political means, he is barred from taking part in the political process, either because political participation requires prior consent by a party committee, or because political dissent is suppressed in all kinds of ways.

Either because of unemployment, or nepotism, or corruption, or whatever other reason beyond their control, people are denied access to their own society. These now are powerful motives for radicalisation – the urgent, almost desperate call for changes and new hopes. People do not want to overthrow their own world just for the sake of overthrowing it – they want a future, they want to be included into their own society.

Innovative:
European modernity offered new alternatives to the existing order. These alternatives are what we nowadays know as rationality, liberty, democracy and secularism.

In Islam, a similar development can be witnessed. There is a eagerness to restructure society. New concepts are being developed: 'Islamic' democracy, the 'Islamic' state, 'Islamic' banking. These are developments of the past thirty or fifty years. On a smaller level also, communities,

disenchanted and alienated by their societies, turn away from the state and create their own micro socio-economic infrastructure. In doing so, they are very innovative. Islamic banking (meaning the use of Islamic financial instruments) is a good example. As I mentioned, no bank will provide you with a loan because all the banks are either state banks or still based on socialist structures and thus prefer to give loans to large industries. Now it happens to be that consumer credit is the pivot of Islamic finance. It has lead a dormant existence for hundreds of years, but now, all of a sudden, it has been revitalised, providing new alternatives to the desperate financial needs.

We now come to the next question: does this Islamic modernity create violence? I'm not a lawyer anymore now; I'm a politician, because the answer is yes and no. No, because a majority opts for non-violent responses to all the changes described above. These communities are trying to re-socialise themselves, restructuring their own infrastructure. It is a non-violent movement.

But there is also a yes. Yes, it does create violence precisely because of the feeling of alienation and exclusion that it engenders and which is, in my opinion, the root of radicalisation. The minority that radicalizes does not turn away from a state that is not providing anymore - they actually turn around and fight this society. These radicals mirror their experiences to those of the prophet. He was also forced to leave his hometown Mecca, but returned victoruously. The modern Muslim refuses to be downtrodden and alienated by society. They recapture the discourse and say: "You are not expelling us, you are not alienating us; walking is our own decision and that makes us the true Muslims". This argument has served some to legitimise the use of arms in their confrontation with the society that they no longer consider 'Islamic'.

The situation in the West is different from that of the Arab or Muslim world, of course. But I do see similarities because the already existing feeling of exclusion and alienation among Muslims in the West was reinforced by 9/11. Muslim are now distrusted and their loyalty is put into question. They are constantly on the defence and oftentimes have to justify themselves.
In Holland there was panic when 9/11 happened. What were we going to do with 900.000 Dutch Muslims? What was their reaction to the attacks, to the ideology professed by al-Qaeda? But they were not responding because they had nothing to do with it. That only deepened our suspicions, which again reinforced their feelings of alienation. I was shocked when on separate instances a Pakistani and Moroccan friend, both women, born in Holland and completely integrated into Dutch society, told me last summer upon returning from visiting their relatives: "I have been checking the prices of houses over there because might come a time when we will have to leave Holland". This is a dangerous situation! The danger lies exactly with those Muslims in the West who have embraced even Western modernity. They will do anything to be like us, but still they will be mistrusted given the feeling that they are not allowed to take part in this society of ours. Here is the parallel with the Arab world, because the extreme militants there are not the poor, but middle class, the highly educated who want to take part but who are excluded. The same is now happening here in Europe.
When we are talking about threat, I think there is one. But it has nothing to do with Islam or even with modernity. It has everything to do with alienation and exclusion. Thank you.