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Comments Delivered at Democracy and Global Islam (UC Berkeley, April 22, 2005)

I learned about this conference a couple of days before its convening through an invitation to participate in it. I accepted the invitation, in spite of my trepidations, because of Ms. Heddy Riss's reassuring ways. I participated in the last panel, the "Roundtable: Islam and Conflict." We responded to questions given to us prior to the meeting, questions the panel's moderator, Professor Bruce Cain raised and the audience's questions. I was later asked to submit a written version of what I said in the spur of the moment. What follows, though not strictly a record of what I said, expresses the main points I tried to make in my comments.

Let me start by making one or two observations. I was struck today by how much of our talk about the "global Islam" was indeed barely a little more than a discussion about the Arab world. I also noted that Iran was mentioned only a couple of times, in passing, and then as a pariah case, an Islamist agenda gone awry. I find this omission of Iran's Islamic Republic curious, and want to address it as what in my view was the "repressed" of today's discourse on global Islam. I shall do so while cognizant of my own experience as an Iranian Muslim living in the US.

The bracketing and distancing of Iran and the Islamic Revolution, it appears to me, has the effect—wanted or unwanted, I do not wish to determine—of suppressing the evidence from the only declared Islamist movement to have achieved its goal of statehood via its ideal of a mass revolution. I am using the words "declared" and "Islamist" deliberately as I wish to maintain the all too familiar distinction, in my view of utmost significance, between the two adjectives of Islamic and Islamist. The devil, we were earlier reminded, is not only in details but also in examples. Nevertheless, I am going to hazard an example here. Compare Saudi Arabia and Iran, as states and societies. Iran as a declared Islamist state may or may not be more Islamic than Saudi Arabia.

Which is more Islamic? The answer to this contested issue depends on one's definition of Islam. I submit, however, that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the one that most commentators have in mind when they speak of an Islamist state, perhaps because in Iran Islam governs not as a diffused faith, that is through the sum total of individual Muslim's likes and dislikes and via traditional division of "religious" and "secular" authority, but directly as a declared state ideology, enshrined in constitutional privileges, controlled by a politic-religious custodial apparatus that consists of a distinct group of leaders and cadres.

I am aware that the theoretical and historical grounding of the distinction, as I hurriedly attempted here, may not be to every one's satisfaction, but I believe many of those present would agree with me that we did not sustain the distinction between the Islamic and the Islamist clearly and forcefully throughout the day. Had we done so, the guiding, and may add ominous, question of today's deliberations would have bifurcated into two rather distinct questions corresponding to the two poles of the distinction. On the one hand we would be asking "is Islam compatible with democracy?" and on the other

"is Islamism compatible with democracy?" One more point: the first question, "Is Islam compatible with democracy?" is the one posed by this conference, but as the day grew it became clear to many of the speakers that the question is somewhat inaccurately articulated. The question should rather be "Is democracy possible in Muslim societies?" So we now have two questions in front of us: the possibility of democracy in the Muslim world (by which we really mean mainly the countries of the Middle East), and the relationship between Islamist movements and democratization. The central tenet of my comments is that the Iranian experience with Islamist movement has some lessons of universal validity to teach us regarding these questions, especially that of the relationship between Islamist mobilization and democratization.

Contrary to what was suggested earlier, I submit that, horror of horrors, all Islamist states shall become necessarily like Iran. To me this is as inevitable as was the communist states gravitation towards a largely similar totalitarian model in an earlier era, a notion that was also vehemently denied by many who held on to the dream of a Marxist utopia. Then, you may recall, every existing communist state was dismissed as an anomaly. Not every Marxist state shall become like USSR, we were told. Well they did and did not, but they all carried a disturbing family resemblance. I can see why those who wish to see the Islamic states established in other Muslim countries would want to disassociate themselves from the bad apple of an existing Islamic state in Iran. But this sort of hyper distinction between Iran and other Middle Eastern countries should have no unexamined place among those of us who want to assess the future of peace, prosperity and democracy among Muslims in an exceedingly globalized world. Having said that let me explain why, on the basis of the Iranian case, I am weary about the future of any Islamist movement.

We heard that Egypt has experienced "a renaissance of mosque related activities" with the number of mosques and attendance at mosques on a steep rise since the 1970s. This reminds me, may I confess forebodingly, of Iran in the years preceding the Islamic Revolution. At that time the attendance in mosques, indeed in all other forms of religious institutions and practices, such as periodic in-home sermons, non- mosque religious centers (Hoseynniahs), as well as ad hoc meetings in neighborhood halls and the courtyards of the affluent merchants, was rapidly flourishing. Islamic schools, cooperatives, banks, charities were springing up everywhere. But in today's Iran mosques are empty throughout much of the year including Fridays. (So is, by the way, the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini.) In place of the once mighty ideological Islamicity of the revolutionary years a meager and de-centered folk religion with no theological, social or political pretensions is what is left for the dwindling portion of the population who wish to hold onto some sort of piety. This is a form of religiosity that has lost most of its doctrinal claims; it consists mostly of magical and ritualistic fragments that do not add up to a creed. Islamic obligations such as fasting or daily prayers are largely ignored. Three out of four Tehrani adults (no less than a fifth of the nations' population lives in the capital) do not pray at all or do so sporadically. Many of the younger people have never been into a mosque. What is true about Tehran is true about most of the country. Worst for the clerical state, Islam has ceased to be religion for a growing number of Iranians, and has instead become the name of the sum total of every stricture on human liberty imaginable, the short hand for clerical discourse of tyranny. By some accounts less than five percent of the Iranians are bona fide Muslims. The same drift away from Islam,

which for many has already elevated into an outright antipathy towards religion, characterizes millions of Iranians who now live abroad. They are clearly among the least religious people who have emigrated from an Islamic country. In place of the promise of a moral order, Iran is now suffering from the near total collapse of moral authority, and is consequently ravaged by alarming number of what Iranians call social epidemics: addiction, prostitution, run away children, etc.

In short, the kind of Islam that provided the lifting power for the Islamic Revolution has now dissipated into a much weakened and diffuse form of religiosity. It is broken down into shards of what once was a Religion. This new form of religiosity lacks a center, no overarching theodicy, no unifying discourse that gathers it into an ideology with the desire and capability of running a modern state. It does not crystallize about a network of religious apparatuses. Perhaps this is the beginning of the arrival of an individualized form of Muslimness that, as was suggested here, can alone make secular democracy possible. But this is a conclusion which I am not qualified to draw. Iranians are on the whole now not only one of the least Islamic, let alone Islamist, of Muslim populations, but in many ways one of the least religious of comparable nations throughout the world. They are certainly among the most secular in the Middle East.

How did this come about? How did the people who waged the first successful Islamist mass movement in modern history become one of the most religiously apathetic people anywhere? How did we get from there to here?

The appeal of Islam for my generation was not as much theological as it was sociological. It was Islam's ethics and politics, not its "dogma" and eschatology, which mesmerized my generation, and energized it for the huge political undertaking that was the Revolution. Islam was first and foremost my generation's ideological stance and only secondarily our "religion." We made our religion to sound like our politics and not the other way around. We did not much think about how Islam organized our relations along the vertical axis of transcendence as we obsessed about how it appointed us along the horizontal front of domestic and international political and economic struggles we felt we were called upon to fight. When I look back at our writings of that period and the endless meetings and discussions that we had, I am struck by how very little of it came within a mile of any theological concern. We fashioned our Islam and our understanding of its history and theology around our yearning for a social system unlike those of either the East or the West. For us, the name of the governing spirit of that other possible version of an "un-alienated" society was Islam. Nearly all of our pre-revolutionary perspiration was about our version of this Islamic utopia, defined by its justice, incorruptibility, authenticity and fraternity. We were against the existing corrupt moral order, and were competing not with other religions, and their theologies and forms of piety, but with the Marxists.

Why did things not go as beautifully as we dreamed in Iran? The oversimplified answer: We were victims of a sociological blind-spot—yes we who were whipped into revolutionary ecstasy by a sociological dream! To be seduced by the Islamist's sociology is one thing, but to be a good sociologist yet another. We conceived and talked of Islam as if it were a disembodied religion, a faith that existed in a Platonic realm, outside of the existing social, political and economic institutions. But no religion not always already tainted by real history, has ever existed. In the real world of politics and economics the

only existing Islam is the "actual" Islam, a real historically constituted phenomenon which is sustained through a particular labor of ideological production and reproduction. As such it always already comes as practices of men and women who dispense religion or are "religious." Islam already comes with people who are authorized by tradition to define and control it. So what came to power in Iran after the Islamic Revolution was not Islam as such, but the clerical class and its lay allies. It was their idea and practice of what Islam meant that came to quickly dominate the post revolutionary state. We were hoping to attain an Islamic State through an Islamic Revolution but what we ended up getting was a Clerical State. Islam, it turned out, was the cover behind which Islamists took the helms of an oil rich country.

How else could it be? If Islamic principles were supposed to run the state, then who else but the Islamists (Muslim scholars and their clientele in the case of Iran) were the most qualified to carry them out? If medicine were to form the ideological foundation of a state, would any one be surprised if doctors ended up running the show? That is the problem with all ideological states, as we know from the twentieth century's wasteful experience with Communism. Lenin, echoing Plato, has even formulated a legitimacy theory in support of the right of the specialists to govern a state run by ideological principles. I make this point not to exonerate religion from two and half decades of misery in Iran, but to put my finger on where I believe the inescapable crux of the problem of all ideological states, all versions of an Islamic state, lies. It cannot be my aim here to define what democracy is, but it seems evident to me that the assumption of constitutional privilege by Islam was that which undermined the prospects of democracy in Iran. Without the enshrinement of that privilege in the constitution the prospects of democracy in Iran would have been very different. But then Iran would have not been an "Islamic" state, or would have been so only in name.

There is virtually nothing in the above brief analysis of the rise and fall of Islamism in Iran that does not apply, in principle at least, to every other movement that attempts a take over of the state by Islamic mobilization. Though different in many respects from this or that Arab country, Iran is by no means an exception to the overall Middle Eastern pattern of interaction among the factors of Islamism, globalization and democracy. The rise and fall of Islamism in Iran may indeed turn out to be the template for the history of all such movements. Iran was simply the first to try Islam as its axis of state and social transformation and the result was a colossal failure. There is nothing peculiar about Iran to make its experiment with Islamic state automatically different from what can happen elsewhere in the Middle East. Indeed the more I listened today, the more I became convinced that the history of the Islamic Republic has a lot to teach us about the possible trajectories of Islamist movements in other countries. Everywhere, I feared, the revival of Islam is tantamount to the rise of those who control the network of religious institutions. Indeed from this strict sociological perspective, what was repeatedly called "religious revivalism" in today's discussions, I feel, may everywhere be incompatible with democracy.

There is another relevant issue that I think here is as good a place as anywhere to mention. After all said, it may not be democracy that is the crux of the problem but economic prosperity, as another speaker pointed out. If globalism and Muslim's response to it do not bring about sustained economic development and sustainable hope in

prosperity for Muslims, neither democracy nor any other political system can work. The pro-democracy movement in Iran is wide and deep, but the hold of the clerical state is threatened less by this cultural shift as by the state's mediocre economic performance. It is ultimately the prospect for good-paying jobs and a hope-filled future for the millions of the youth, men and women, both increasingly educated, that are amassing at the gates of an exceedingly small and inadequately growing economy that determines the value of Islam in the twenty first century. Probably another pertinent question to ask is: Are Islam and economic development compatible? Or, put differently, can Muslims create prosperous states? Earlier I evoked the case of the "really existing communist" countries. Their failure was no less caused by lack of democracy as it as was by incurable economic impotency. Again, the Islamist experience in Iran is a testament to the power of the reality of human ineptitude and greed to masquerade as "Islamic economics."

To summarize, let us return to our twin questions: Is democratization possible in Muslim societies? And is democracy compatible with Islamism? The answer to the first question, the growing democracy movement in Iran and the rise of a culture of tolerance and secular dialogue suggest, is very probably yes. But as suggested by the same history, this cannot be brought about by the Islamists and their powerful networks of mosques, charities and schools. In other words, Islamism and its sociological realization as the mobilization of the masses into a "faith-based community" a *ummah*, must be rejected if democracy is going to have a future in the Middle East. Islamist mobilization creates such an imbalance of authorization and mass power that can only suffocate the possibility of the growth of a genuine democracy. Ironically, again as suggested by the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, only when the Islamist movement is exposed as an impediment to the felicitous functioning of democracy among Muslims that democratization can finally take hold among men and women who have finally, in the words of Kant, "emerged from their self-incurred immaturity."

Another question put to the panel concerned itself with the place of Muslims in Western countries, especially France, Germany and the US. The question, as I understood it, was about the conditions under which Muslims will be absorbed into the "main stream" of their new countries, instead of developing resistant identities. No doubt, this and other related questions were at some level motivated by worries regarding homeland security in the aforementioned countries. My comments were restricted to the US and informed by my status as a Muslim of Iranian decent living in this country.

First, I believe that we can only fruitfully proceed if we distinguish between Islam as a faith and Muslimness as a form of identity, between adhering to a religion and belonging to an "imaginary community." Is there an Islamic community in the US? Would there ever be one? Can Islam function for the Muslim population the way Asianness has worked for the Asian Americans, or Latinness for Latino-Americans, or Judaism for Jewish people? The answers to all of these questions, indeed the very pertinence of the analogies we can draw, depend on which of the above characterizations of Islam we have in mind. Second, we must bear in mind that Islam is not the only form of identity that calls the Muslims to a community. Our Muslimness sometimes trumps, but on other occasions is trumped, by our other identities, say our being an Arab or being a Kurd, or a South Asian. My own hunch is that given the centrifugal force of racial and ethnic divides that crisscross the Muslim population in the US (more than half of the

Muslims are African-Americans, the majority of Arabs in the US are non-Muslims, Iranians are Shiites, and many "Muslims" are virtually non-religious, etc.), Islam cannot easily fashion itself into a well-defined community.

To view Islam as a form of identity reminds us that identities, in ways that is not the case with faiths as such, take on their socio-political valence by the context of social interactions within which they operate. Identities are as much produced by the self naming itself as by the others naming the self. To put it less abstrusely, what becomes of Muslims as an imaginary community, here and abroad, has a lot to do with the Muslim populations' perception of its treatment by others.

Let me offer my own experience as an example. I became more of a "Muslim" following the Federal government's knee-jerk treatment of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern decent in the wake of 9/11 terrorists attacks in the US. It was after the INS and the State Department very much indiscriminately targeted Muslims and people of Middle Eastern ancestry, as a community that potentially harbored terrorists—i.e. only after we were treated like we were a separate and identifiable community—that I was forced to pull out my identity as a Muslim Middle Easterner from the cupboard, dust it off and claim it as one of my identities. After 9/11 it became increasingly harder for me to go on behaving as an un-marked American. It was hard for me to turn around and not be addressed as a Muslim. With Muslims under pressure to offer apologies for what has been done in their name, and by the reactions I was getting every time I pleaded disassociation with Islam, it become increasingly clear to me that my cosmopolitanism is being construed as a sign of irresponsibility, perhaps even cowardice. So at some point, I assumed the position of being a Muslim and tried to engage my surrounding as so identified. I do not know if my renewed Muslimness is a case of "resistant identity," but I suspect that if US government were to repeat singling out Muslims in the future, the emergence of a resistant Islamic identity will be enhanced rather than curtailed. I believe I am saying something which was said earlier, though conversely. Inclusiveness, or the existence of a common dream, as it was said earlier apropos of the American Dream (and lack there of an equivalent European Dream), can go a long way to forestall the rise of resistant communities and identities.