

THE ARABS, ISLAM AND GLOBALIZATION

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The twenty-first century presents the Arab-Muslim world with a challenge that may determine its future for generations. The Arabs are quite concerned about maintaining their cultural identity and their independence in the face of the West's superiority and its pervading globalization. Evidence of this is the huge volume – verging on a deluge – of Arabic literature on globalization and its “dangers,” in addition to hundreds of seminars, workshops, and conferences focusing on “Islam and globalization,” the Arab-Islamic heritage and national and cultural identity.

However, the Arab intelligentsia is divided into three different attitudes toward globalization. There are those who reject it as the “highest stage of imperialism” and a “cultural invasion,” threatening to dominate people, undermine their distinctive “cultural personality” and destroy their “heritage,” “authenticity,” “beliefs” and “national identity.”

The second group of Arab thinkers, secularist by inclination, welcomes globalization as the age of modern science, advanced technology, global communications and knowledge-based information. It argues that it is no longer possible for people to be “cocooned” within their own boundaries to ruminate upon their heritage, be its captives

and nurse nostalgia for an “imagined” past. It calls for interacting with globalization and for benefiting from its “positive opportunities” in knowledge, science and technology, without necessarily losing their Arab-Islamic cultural individuality.

A third group calls (probably naively) for finding an appropriate form of globalization that is compatible with the national and cultural interests of the people. Globalization cannot be wholly accepted or rejected, it argues. The attitude of this group has been described as “positive neutrality,” a self-interested pragmatic outlook, seeking a middle ground since globalization is an inevitable historical phenomenon with which the Arabs will have to interact. In between, there are other variations in attitudes toward globalization. This paper will focus primarily on the cultural implications of globalization for Islam as viewed by Muslims, in particular the Islamists, who express the greater suspicion of this development and, instead, seek to promote an Islamic “universalism” that, in their view, is superior to any cultural paradigm imposed by the Christian West.¹

In addition to focusing on globalization from an Islamist point of view, this paper will also present the views of moderate Arabs and Muslims, who entertain a more open, yet critical and cautious attitude toward globalization. How Arab intellectu-

als assess the relationship between globalization and their cultural heritage will also receive special attention. All of the sources on which this paper is based are the original Arabic works and references. Translation of full quotations and paraphrases into English are by the author, except where indicated otherwise.

Since globalization is identified with American military, political and economic superiority, the attitude of the Arabs toward American power and hegemony, style of life and cultural values will be noted. It will become obvious that political considerations, such as the unqualified American support of Israel, have conditioned Arab attitudes toward American culture as well as toward globalization.

GLOBALIZATION EQUALS AMERICANIZATION

There is a general consensus among Arabs – both those who oppose globalization and those who favor it – that it is identical with Americanization. They view globalization as an American design to disseminate American culture as a model for the whole world. A North African writer, Abd al-Ilah Balqaziz, equates globalized culture with American culture, because “the means, powers, interests and aims that steer globalization are all American.” He accuses the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, of using the pretext of fighting terrorism, fanaticism and intolerance to undermine Islam, because the Arabs and Islam are the only obstacle in the face of today’s empire under American hegemony.²

America’s military and economic power and its virtual monopoly of cyberspace and the information revolution, as well as its seductive culture, corroborate

the impression of its global hegemony, leading a British author to write: “At times, indeed, it is difficult to distinguish between globalization, in its many forms, and Americanization.”³

Globalization is the foundation of the world order in the twenty-first century, writes Husayn Malum. The strategy of world powers, with the United States in the forefront, is to promote economic globalization, or the supremacy of the market over the whole world, and to destroy the political power of states, nationalities and peoples, he adds. Globalization is tied to the “New American Political Project,” which seeks to unify the world by means of “market capitalism,” Malum asserts.⁴ However, “globalization is not just a mechanism of capitalist development,” says another North African writer. “It is also and primarily an ideology reflecting a hegemonic will over the whole world and Americanizing it.”⁵

Radical Islamists view globalization as a new *dawa* (call) for the elimination of the boundaries between *Dar al-Islam* (domain of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr* (domain of infidelity). Globalization, they warn, seeks to join the infidels (Western Christians) and Muslims under the banner of secularism and worldliness, leading to unrestricted freedom in the name of human rights, as understood in the West, and to libertinism, the distinguishing characteristics of the decadence of Western civilization. Radical Islamists claim that Islam would resist such calls by “Crusaders and Jews,” in defense of the *sharia*. It is impossible, they assert, to merge the Muslims and the infidels in the same category in the name of globalization, ‘unity of religions,’ ‘world peace,’ ‘democracy’ or ‘secularism,’ because Muslims are one nation, distin-

guished from all others by a true Islamic doctrine, a perfect law, a culture and a system of morals.⁶

Similar views have been expressed by other than Islamists. Said al-Lawindi, a well-known Egyptian journalist-writer, describes globalization as a “form of American hegemony,” calling it a nightmare (*kabus*). The kind of globalization he favors is one of struggle against and resistance to “this barbaric capitalist hegemony and to confront the danger of Davos (the international economic forum). Globalization has produced nothing but chaos and violence.”⁷

GLOBALIZATION AND ARAB-ISLAMIC CULTURAL HERITAGE

Arab and Muslim intellectuals have been deeply concerned about the impact of globalization on their cultural heritage. At a conference on “Our Heritage: Present and Future in Light of Globalization,” held at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut, Lebanon, Rafik Atweh, the event coordinator, declared dramatically: “In the age of torment and uncertainty toward one’s destiny, the Arab individual is crossing over the bridge of agony, with a fearful protective eye over his cherished values, history and heritage.”

Highlighting his deep concern, Atweh added that the Arabs have plunged into a “canyon of darkness, looking for help to enable them to climb a mountain of overwhelming fast-moving events, at a time when they are not showing readiness to change the *status quo*.”⁸

Globalization, intellectuals insist, will “smother” the peculiarities (*khususiyat*) of Arab national culture, undermine Islamic morality and lead to cultural homogenization. Dr. Jafar Abd al-Salam, general

secretary of the League of Islamic Universities, warns against the cultural danger of globalization and calls for a revivalist cultural project “to deepen the relationship between Muslims and their heritage, which is replete with elements of strength to face all challenges.”⁹

Boutros Boutros Ghali, former UN secretary-general, and Jabir Asfur, both liberal-minded Egyptian intellectuals, warn against the attempt to impose “an alien culture on our traditions and culture.” Asfur describes globalization as “barbaric,” seeking to impose “on us conditions that are antithetical to human cultural diversity, and inimical to civilizational peculiarities.” He condemns globalization’s repressive measures to unify the world and to subordinate the “terrestrial globe” to a single cultural pattern.¹⁰

Yet one discerns among Arab intellectuals a reluctant recognition that the West still represents a civilizational and humanistic model to be emulated without having to give up their cultural peculiarity or to exchange some of their traditions for Western traditions and systems. Hence cultural globalization may not be so bad after all, provided the Arabs are ready for it. The Nobel Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, although critical of American “supremacy and arrogance of power,” sees no “contrariety” between Western and Islamic civilizations.¹¹

ISLAM AND GLOBALIZATION

Muslims have always been proud of, and sensitive about, their religion. The Quran (3:110) tells them they “are the best of people evolved for mankind.” The sensitivity arises from the fact that Islam is not only a faith but also a law, a sharia that regulates all aspects of human life, includ-

ing economic transactions, marriage and divorce, and matters of state. Hence, any modification of the sharia is tantamount to a dilution or a negation of Islam's articles of faith. Muslims have found it more convenient to circumvent, rather than to change, the law. The inability to separate religious and mundane matters, religion and state, has conferred on Islam and Muslims a legacy of rigidity and resistance to change. Any perceived threat to Islam elicits a resentful attitude among the believers and often a defensive call for a return to the pristine age of the "pious ancestors."

Globalization is not the first phenomenon that Muslims regard as a threat to their faith. Westernization or modernization, in general, has always been suspect of being a "cultural invasion" by the Christian West. This suspicion goes all the way back to the Crusades, and to this day Christians, particularly Western Christians, are called Crusaders (*salibiyyun*). Moreover, recent Western colonization and imperialistic domination of most of the Muslim world, the creation and the unqualified support of the state of Israel, and the current invasion of two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, have intensified Arab and Muslim fears and hatred of the West. Hence, globalization seems to be the culmination of historical developments aimed at undermining Islam.

Consequently, the bulk of Arabic literature on globalization reflects fear and suspicion of this new phenomenon. The views of a few leading Arab writers are sufficient to show how their arguments are reminiscent of the same arguments mobilized against modernism, imperialism and Western domination. Adil Husayn, an outspoken leader of the Muslim Brother-

hood, warns against the "deception and cunning" of Western media in "brainwashing the minds" of Arabs and Muslims. By controlling the media, he says, Westerners spread immorality and "smother our religion and identity." Like many others, he discerns an "American-Israeli conspiracy" against Islam. Based on the Quranic verse (49:13), which says that God has made mankind "into nations and tribes," he rejects the claim that globalization will create one world and one culture.¹²

Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri, a noted Muslim author, describes as "ridiculous lies" the West's claim that people are alike; that there is a new world order, justice, and human rights; and that the world is a "small village" governed by a global set of values. He adds, cynically, that the globalization "we know" is that of the hamburger, Coca Cola, McDonald's and the like. He argues that globalization is based on a set of material values: the market, sex and the "economic and corporeal man," all of which "negate human peculiarities, even humanity as such." However, al-Masiri is confident that Islamic values will "mobilize this [Muslim] nation to confront this deadly trend, which dissolves national and religious peculiarities."¹³

Globalization is equated with secularization, which means the "separation of religion and life, replacing Islam with a pragmatic and materialistic European and American thought," asserts Dr. Ahmad Abd al-Rahman. The globalization of the Muslim world would mean the "removal of Islam from thought and action, so that Muslims become subservient to the West." Human rights, freedom and democracy are rationalizations of the power and interests of Western nations, and of America, in particular. In order to impose American globaliza-

tion on the Muslim world, the United States government supports secular forces, protects apostates from Islam such as Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, and subsidizes Orientalists and all secular regimes opposed to Islam, he charges.¹⁴ In short, pragmatism and postmodernism are the guiding principles of American globalization. Islam cannot remain indifferent to this assault. "A new vision and an alternative civilization, derived from the interaction of Islamic truths with actual reality, are needed to ward it off," concludes Abd al-Rahman.¹⁵

Arabs and Muslims, in general, are quite concerned about their cultural identity (*al-huwiyya*), rooted in Islamic history and culture. At a conference of the Muslim World League, held in Mecca and attended by 500 Muslim scholars and writers, the secretary-general of the League, Dr. Abdallah al-Turki, warned that "misfortune will spread all over the world if globalization succeeds in detaching people from their culture and their identity." He charged the United States and its allies with using the September 11 events to "direct globalization against Islamic culture and to arouse Christian prejudices (*narat salibiyya*) against Islam. Other participants voiced similar views, calling for joint efforts among Muslims to fortify themselves economically, politically and socially, so that the Muslim world could withstand the onslaught of Western globalization.¹⁶

The Arab-Muslim's fear and concern about cultural identity may be exaggerated, but in most cases it is unfeigned. Al-Azhar, the supreme religious institution, has been called upon to educate Muslims in the values of their religion and to demonstrate that "Islam is valid for all times." A conference of Muslim scholars, many of them graduates of al-Azhar, was held in Alexan-

dria, Egypt, to address this issue. "The culture we are anxious about," writes Dr. Abdallah Sulayman, consists of "a firm religious belief, a set of values, principles, customs and authentic traditions." He stresses "a commitment to God, family and homeland, loyalty to everything good, truly just and redemptive."¹⁷

In an emotional outburst, Sulayman addresses the West thus: "your globalization, Oh you craven braggarts, is an arbitrary hegemony, a despotic authority, an oppressive injustice and a pitch-black darkness, because it is a globalization without religion and without conscience. It is a globalization of violent force, heedless partisanship, double standards, pervasive materialism, widespread racism, outrageous barbarism and arrogant egotism. It is a globalization that sells illusions, leading to perdition and to burying dreams in the depth of nowhere, spreading flowers over the corpses of the hungry."¹⁸

A number of leading scholars have turned their heavy guns on cultural globalization. Dr. Salim al-Awwa, a distinguished Egyptian Islamic scholar, writes that globalization has a cultural signification (*mafhum*), the terms of which are those of Western culture. To propagate them is to promote the dominance of that culture. He insists that Muslims have no alternative but to assert "our cultural and religious identity" in the face of globalization. "Islam," he adds, "has stood firm in the face of earlier invasions, and will not be powerless in facing new ones."¹⁹

In a book titled *Al-Muslimun wa al-Awlamah*, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a renowned Islamic scholar and the most popular TV preacher in the Arab world, describes globalization as "a new imperialism, a fate imposed on us." Contrasting this "Ameri-

canization of the world” with Islam’s universalism (*al-alamiyya*), which recognizes the peoples of the world as brothers (cf. Quran: 21:107 / 25:1), Qaradawi accuses the Christian West of doing nothing when Muslims are under attack. “Neither the United States nor NATO have [sic] shown any concern about what is happening in the Islamic Republic of Chechnya, whereas they pressured Indonesia to give East Timor, a part of the motherland, its independence, because it is predominantly Christian.” Charging the West – the United States, in particular – with using double standards, one for the Muslims and one for the rest of the world, he claims that the United States “feels uneasy about Islamic Pakistan possessing a nuclear weapon, but has no objection to Hindu India, Buddhist China, Catholic France, Orthodox Russia, Protestant Britain and Jewish Israel possessing it.”²⁰

For Qaradawi, the most far-reaching danger of globalization is to “our beliefs, values, literature and language.” The culture of globalization, he says, is one of consumption and libertinism, which justifies what is prohibited by heavenly religions and human ideals. It allows complete nudeness and has special clubs for the nude. It is a culture of open and free sex; it even legalizes same-sex marriages. Qaradawi is worried about the Arab-Muslim youth falling victim to Western attractions and temptations.²¹

More galling is the propagation of what Qaradawi calls “modern Judaica” (*Israiliyyat*), such as the Holocaust, which he considers “a fabricated lie.” Amusingly enough, he calls beauty contests “the globalization of a woman’s body” and condemns industries geared to women for ignoring morals, religion and human consid-

erations in order to reap great profits. Sexual excitements are the hallmark of Western advertisements, especially those aimed at the youth. In short, all of these activities denigrate women, Qaradawi alleges.²²

Qaradawi is highly critical of Arab-Muslim intellectuals who champion cultural globalization, rejecting their argument that culture is universal and not just Western. He makes the distinction between culture and science. Scientific laws are universal and are not affected by religion, country and people, whereas each culture has its own peculiarities. “Culture is not a pure and abstract knowledge; it is knowledge and cognitions mixed with values and beliefs, embodied in actions, and reflected in arts and literatures, which are learned and experienced. It is influenced by religion, language environment and cultural and civilizational legacies, as well as by interaction, positive and negative, with others.”²³

As an advocate of Arab-Muslim authenticity, Qaradawi, like many other writers with Islamist inclinations, rejects the “importation” of ideologies and doctrines, “which grew in a soil other than our soil, addressed to people other than our people, express a philosophy other than our philosophy, appeal unto a God other than our God, and deal with a universe the culture of which is different from our culture.”²⁴ He sees globalization as a steadfast effort to “Christianize the world” by imposing a “religious imperialism” by military, economic, political and other means. In the end, it all goes to serve Israel and the Zionist project, he asserts.²⁵

Admitting that globalization is inevitable, Qaradawi counsels a measured attitude toward it. Yet, “we should not

accept it as it is... We Arabs, Muslims and Africans and all the poor and the wretched of the earth, must [cooperate] to protect ourselves from this new invasion.” However, he says, simplistically, there is no harm in benefiting from the positive achievements of globalization, provided “we reject its material and moral negatives.” Islam, he affirms, remains the shield.²⁶

The first step to ameliorate Arab-Muslim life, Qaradawi suggests, is to “know what is wrong with us and not to blame others for all of our ills. We must endeavor to change ourselves, our lives and our society according to the divine *Sunna*” (Cf. Quran:13:11). Mindful of the dire image radical Islamists have given Islam, he calls for interacting with the West in order to correct the false impressions it has about Islam. At the same time, “we call upon the West to give up old enmities, and the new designs to control our countries and our resources. The age of imperialism is gone. We must have the freedom to organize our lives in light of our faith. The West should not impose its philosophy on us by force, and it should not treat us as enemies.” He says Islam is a peaceful religion, and those Muslims who use violence do not represent Islam; they are forced into violence and extremism by the injustices of the West. Later on, Qaradawi decreed that it is legitimate to kill American civilians, and he has supported Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Ironically, while he attacks the United States, he finds no inconsistency in having two of his children study in America and another at the American University in Cairo.²⁷

For Muhammad Qutb, another leading Islamist scholar, globalization is the worst form of imperialism, “an iniquitous and

arrogant form, that seeks not only to plunder peoples’ livelihood, but also to obliterate their identity and turn them into subordinates and slaves.” Aimed specifically against Muslims, globalization, in Qutb’s words, “is an octopus spreading its tentacles into politics, thought, religion, morals, culture, traditions and customs.” He blames Muslims for neglecting their religion and its obligations. In particular, he blames Muslim secularists for succumbing to the attractions of globalization. There is no doubt in his mind that Islam is superior to globalization and Western civilization, which is a “depraved civilization.” Islam is the “only sound system.” While globalization imposes a specific way of life—the American way—Islam recognizes diversity.²⁸

The central theme of the Islamist criticism and rejection of globalization is its emphasis on the right to “cultural diversity.” Abd al-Aziz al-Tuwayjiri, director-general of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), invokes the declaration of International Cultural Cooperation, issued by the General Conference of UNESCO on November 4, 1996, which affirms the dignity of each culture and the right and duty of each people to develop its own culture, and asserts that “all cultures, with their rich diversity, differences and mutual influence, constitute part of the heritage owned in common by all mankind” and that the “diversity of identities and specificities is not inconsistent in the least with the mutual interest of peoples and nations, provided it is allowed to unfold in the context of a human cooperation based on mutual acquaintance and coexistence.”²⁹

For Western globalization “to mop up the identities of peoples by insidious, coercive means would not only be a

deviation from the natural course of things and a rebellion against the laws of the universe and the essence of life, but it would also be a violation of the very laws agreed by humans, a dangerous encroachment upon the rules of international law and a threat to peace, security and stability in the world," al-Tuwayjiri asserts.³⁰

But how can cultural identity be safeguarded "in the context of a far-reaching globalization?" Al-Tuwayjiri wonders. He finds the Western stance vis-à-vis the identity of peoples "conspicuously contradictory." While the West takes pride in its own identity, it refuses to recognize the national identities of non-Western peoples. In a sweeping statement, he charges that globalization, being equivalent to American hegemony, "is downright inconsistent with the rules of international law, the reality of international relations, let alone national economics, sovereignty and the principle of cultural diversity." He warns of a collapse in world stability and a "worldwide anarchy of thinking and conduct."³¹

Yet Al-Tuwayjiri is convinced that mankind, and not only the Arab-Muslim world, "cannot disentangle itself from the constraints of globalization... It can, however, devise a countercultural current apt to face up to the hegemonic drive of the phenomenon of globalization on the theoretical and practical levels... pending the emergence of new world powers that would act as opponents or at least counterweights to the power currently holding the reins of the world order."³²

In the end, Al-Tuwayjiri suggests that the "international will should gear the thrust of globalization towards science, technology and knowledge at large in a way to make the cultural and scientific aspect

outweigh the economic and political aspect so as to safeguard the national interests of states, the rights of individuals and communities and the identities of peoples and nations." Consequently, "globalization must coexist with identities within the framework of cultural diversity for the achievement of human prosperity and world peace. Only then can globalization be a boon for mankind, not a bane."³³

Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, rector of al-Azhar, has no objection to globalization provided it eliminates barriers between the peoples of the world so that they may "cooperate in righteousness and piety, and not in sin and acrimony." (Cf. Quran 5:3 / 49:13). What Muslims would reject are "transactions in things forbidden by God. Mankind could enjoy and benefit from the products of civilization so long as they are within the bounds set by God." Muslims would never exchange what is based on the sharia, which enjoins justice, security and peace, for something less good, he concludes.³⁴

IN DEFENSE OF GLOBALIZATION

Not all Arab-Muslim writers and scholars are opposed to globalization. In fact, there is a vocal minority who strongly advocate joining the twenty-first century. They are critical of the authoritarianism of Arab-Muslim political regimes, and more so of the Islamist discourse, which they regard as backward and bigoted. Advocates of globalization argue that it has become the "discourse of the age" by virtue of the communication revolution, which has transformed the world into a "large village, no nation can keep clear of, unless it chooses to live on the margin of history."³⁵

Dr. Fuad Zakariya, an Egyptian

professor of philosophy, charges that those who oppose globalization do not understand it, and would not be able to give a cogent and precise definition of the concept. The term, he argues, has become tainted, like secularism, and hence it is condemned without any attempt to understand its meaning and implications fully. Zakariya's concern is not primarily to defend globalization but to defend "sound thinking" and to question the enlightenment of those who speak constantly about things they know little or nothing about. For example, those who talk about the "greed of the multinational corporations and their danger to the developing countries... are pouring old wine in new bottles. The phenomenon is an old one, and has been criticized since the dawn of imperialism."³⁶

After pointing out some of the benefits of globalization in information and culture, Zakariya concludes that there is a great deal of misunderstanding about globalization. He reminds his Arab compatriots that there are certain problems that can only be tackled globally, such as environmental pollution and decay, the population explosion, and global warming.

For Jurj Tarabishi, a prominent Syrian writer, Arab critics of globalization use the term as a pretext to renew their scorn of modernity and Western civilization. He suspects there are "subconscious psychological fixations, stubborn and fanatical, behind such a negative attitude."³⁷ He describes as "paranoid" the perception of globalization as a great global conspiracy, hatched by the multinational corporations and carried out by the IMF, UN agencies and the media. He also dismisses the charge that it is the hegemony of Western civilization and culture, calling this "missionary discourse" against Western civilization

nothing more than the "marketing of illusion or the approbation of backwardness."³⁸

Tarabishi accuses the Arab intelligentsia of repeating what had been said about "cultural invasion," "imperialism," "dependency" and "modernity:" that they were Western and invasive. Referring to the overwhelming number of conferences, periodical articles, editorials, books, et cetera, on globalization, he says there is a kind of "ideological inflation" in the Arab intelligentsia's articulation of globalization. He calls their attitude "talismanic" (*tawizi*), closer to that of a sorcerer who, by cursing the name, seeks to ward off the evil and to neutralize its effects.

As a nation, the Arabs appear to have entered the modern age through the wrong door, Tarabishi observes. Understandably, certain historical factors have played a role in complicating the relation of the Arabs with their age: the connection between modernity and imperialism, the forceful implantation of the state of Israel in the heart of the Arab land, and lately the Gulf wars. What is disturbing to him is "the ferocious ideological campaign" to withdraw from the age and revolt against it in the name of Islamic fundamentalism. Tarabishi's main concern is that the Arab rejection of globalization may crystallize into a rejection of modernity altogether.³⁹

In the opinion of another writer, there is a great deal of exaggeration, verging on mania (*hawas*), of the negative effects of globalization on national identity and cultural peculiarities. Admitting that American culture has a certain attractiveness to it, he insists the fear of American cultural hegemony is still exaggerated. Globalization is a historical development forging ahead with or without America, he maintains, adding that those who reject globalization

completely in defense of cultural identity will invite cultural and political oblivion. He argues that the ordinary Arab, preoccupied with daily living, is not agitated by the question of identity; it is the Arab intellectual, obsessed with identity, who has made the question of globalization problematical and a major crisis. The obsession intensifies in times of crises and defeats, which threaten the heritage of a nation or a group.⁴⁰

Like a few Arab intellectuals, Turki Hamad is confident of Western modernity, in general, and contemporary globalization, in particular, and that the technological culture they have engendered is on its way to becoming a comprehensive global culture, whether the Arabs like it or not, or whether they accept it or not. Arab traditional culture, ill-defined and elitist, based on a verbal rhetorical structure, will be of no use, he asserts. "How can the eloquence of the word compete with the technicality of scientific facts?" he wonders.⁴¹

The reformist writer rejects as "naïve" and "superficial" the contention that Arabs and Muslims can adopt Western technology but not Western values. He sees no threat to cultural identity from adopting globalization. "The global culture has become a common human heritage and a general human faith. Who can deny the universality of democracy and the common human faith in its general values, such as equality, individual freedom and equality of opportunity?" he asks.⁴²

VIEWES OF 2 ARAB PHILOSOPHERS

Two Arab philosophers, Sadeq Jalal al-Azm, professor of philosophy at the Syrian University, and Hasan Hanafi, professor of philosophy at Cairo University, debated the question of how Arabs should confront

globalization at a conference sponsored by the Beirut Heritage Committee and held at the UNESCO Palace in the Lebanese capital. Their views had already been published in a book almost three years before the debate.⁴³

Al-Azm is an avowedly secular thinker, while Hanafi is committed to the Islamic heritage without being opposed to certain aspects of Western culture. Aware of the "narrow-minded" position of the Islamists, al-Azm reminds his coreligionists that "foreign-made products, like watches, computers and airplanes," were allowing Muslims to monitor prayer times and travel to the *hajj*, implying that people were fooling themselves if they sought to ignore the impact of the West when deciding to embrace 'authentic' religion.⁴⁴

Hanafi is skeptical about the benefits of cultural globalization. For him, globalization is not much more than a mechanism for the exploitation of world riches by the great powers at the expense of the poor people of the earth. He equates the culture of globalization with Western consumerism and its values. Globalization is not an ordained fate from which there is no redemption, he asserts. Neither is it a historical law governing all mankind. It is in conflict with cultural peculiarities, national will and independence. Hanafi sees the confrontation between the Arabs and the West not as a subject for scientific research, but as a historical-existential crisis reflecting a struggle more than a dialogue. It may reflect a pathological feeling of an inferiority complex of the vanquished vis-à-vis a superiority complex of the vanquisher, the colonized and the colonizer. In short, it is an unequal relationship between two adversaries.⁴⁵

According to Hanafi, globalization is a

manifestation of a latent Western “self-centeredness,” based on an ethnic racism and the desire to rule and to dominate. Western powers have used various ideas and notions to rationalize their hegemony over the Third World, such as “globalization,” “unipolar world,” “the end of history,” “clash of civilizations,” and “the world as a single village.” The danger of globalization to cultural identity is but a prelude to greater dangers to the nation-state, national independence and culture, he concludes.⁴⁶

Unlike Hanafi, al-Azm has no feeling of uneasiness about globalization or the assimilation of Western knowledge. In his introductory statement in the debate, the Syrian philosophy professor says, echoing Marc Anthony: “I have come not to praise globalization, criticize it, or to bury it, live or dead, but to understand it.” He says it is a phenomenon in the process of becoming. Everything about it remains subject to controversy, dispute, conjectures, suggestions, condemnations and commendations.⁴⁷ However, he maintains that globalization is the historical and inevitable outcome of nineteenth-century capitalism. The dynamics of capitalism are bound to open up a new horizon with a globalized form of production that will transform the societies of the Third World to make them conform to the new operations of accumulation in the Center (*markaz*). In his opinion, globalization is a higher stage of “historical capitalism,” spreading its social relations into areas outside the Center.⁴⁸

For al-Azm, globalization “represents the period of capitalist transformation for all mankind” under the leadership and control of the Western powers, the countries of the Center. The countries of the Center will seek to change and control

conditions in the Periphery in a manner that will serve their interests, such as transforming all non-capitalist forms of production, discouraging local industrial development and making most people dependent on employment. He foresees an increase in unemployment as well as more polluting industries in the Third World. Al-Azm is not uncritical of globalization, but he accepts its inevitability and acknowledges its benefits. He describes it as “the kingdom of necessity, fate and destiny, coming from the Center and those who hold the reins of power. The future of the Third World countries will depend on how they react to it.”⁴⁹ Al-Azm favors globalization on the grounds that it is “the spirit of the age and the course of history.” He counsels the Arabs to “keep away from conspiracy theories and simplistic, ‘fast-food’ descriptions of globalization.”

Hanafi accuses the advocates of globalization and Westernization of being disloyal to their own culture and heritage. The intellectual who adopts two cultures is “on the margin” and is not a “globalized intellectual” (*muthaqqaf awlami*). He must be loyal to his particular culture and be able to use other cultures to enrich his own, just as early Muslim philosophers like al-Kindi, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina had done. In contrast, Hanafi says, for the present “globalized” intellectual, the culture of the “other” is an end in itself, while the culture of the “I” has become anachronistic. While al-Azm discerns no “Arabized” response to globalization, Hanafi is optimistic about an “Oriental globalization and an Arabic-Islamic centralism” generated to confront Western globalization. He concludes by saying that history is the “arena of the struggle of wills, individual and societal, and not a pre-ordained fate and an inevitable destiny.”⁵⁰

THE ARAB-MUSLIM HERITAGE

Concern about the threat of globalization to the Arab-Islamic heritage (*al-Turath*) has been paramount in the thinking and writings of the Arab-Muslim intelligentsia. No one denies the importance of heritage in the life of individuals and the history of nations; it is essential for development, stability and prosperity. But with the passage of time, heritage has to be reinterpreted to accommodate advances in knowledge and changes in lifestyle. Blind attachment to one's heritage is a recipe for stagnation. Cultural isolation and lack of interaction with global change will be detrimental to identity, authenticity and heritage. Like every living organism, heritage must be able to assimilate the new and be receptive to human thought and experience, in general. The alternative, as some Arab writers have warned, is that the *salafi retreat* (referring to the fundamentalists' call for turning back to the past) will threaten society with fragmentation, introversion and perdition.

Arab concern about cultural identity and the Arab-Islamic heritage may give the impression that there is agreement on its content. This is not the case. There are serious differences between various political and Islamist groups, not to mention the differences of opinion and interpretation among the intellectuals. What constitutes the Arab-Islamic heritage and who is to define it remain the most pressing and controversial issue facing Arab-Muslim societies. Radical Islamists seem to have no problem defining it. For them, it is the path and traditions of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*). When they affirm "Islam is the solution," they mean the Islam of the days of the Prophet and the Orthodox Caliphs. The sharia (mainly the Quran

and the Sunna, as interpreted and practiced during the pristine days of Islam) is regarded as being valid for all times and places and must be the law of the land.

However, a number of Arab intellectuals have questioned this blind attachment to the Arab-Islamic heritage, arguing that what was valid and relevant fifteen centuries ago is no longer so today. Moreover, they even question the Islamic authenticity of certain parts and aspects of this heritage. Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, a prominent North African scholar, is probably the first Arab writer to question its authenticity. In a book dedicated to the critique of the Arab mind, Jabiri asserts that the Arabs have not been able to adjust the relations between parts of their heritage or adjust the relation of the heritage to themselves in a manner that would constitute "our Arab self" according to the requirements of the age.⁵¹

Jabiri goes further to assert that the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage "is not even authentic beyond doubt, but is only authentic according to certain terms (*shurut*)" laid down and abided by people of learning who lived during the Tadween, the era stretching from the middle of the second century until the middle of the third century A.H., when the elements of culture were written down. What is of particular significance is that those terms, which Jabiri calls "the first act of independent opinion (*raiy*)," are still accepted within Arab culture as the "framework of reference" of Arab thought from the age of Tadween to this day, or at least "the primary and basic parts of this framework."⁵²

It is not difficult to surmise what Jabiri is driving at in his critical and controversial treatise. He contends that the "Bedouin world," created in the early centuries of

Islam, still dominates the Arab mind today. In other words, the “[desert] Arabian is in fact “the creator of the [present] Arab world, the world that the Arabs live in, in terms of language, perception, imagination, values and intuitions.” This world, he adds with a little exaggeration, “is incomplete, poor, shallow, arid and sensual—a primeval and unhistorical world.” This world reflects pre-Islamic history, the *jahiliyya*, prior to the conquest and the establishment of the state.⁵³

Jabiri then volunteers a devastating statement about Bedouin culture, in which one finds “neither deep thought, nor constancy and philosophy of expression.” Hence, the nomadic Arabian “is not amenable to deep thinking.” This is natural, but “what is not natural, and what must be understood in order to be changed, is that the Arab mind remains until today fastened to that sensual, unhistorical world, which was erected by the age of Tadween on the bases of the lowest levels of Arab civilization throughout history. It was the civilization of the nomadic Bedouins, which was taken as a base, and which imposed on the Arab mind a specific way of judging new things by the standards of the old.”⁵⁴

Jabiri defines the Arab mind as “juris-tic” (*aqlan fiqhiyyan*), a mind limited to searching the roots (*usul*) of every branch of the law, hence of everything new to be based on something old, depending fundamentally on the religious text. The text has become the authoritative reference for the Arab mind and its activities. Jabiri accuses Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafii (767-820), founder of the Shafii school of jurisprudence, of restricting independent opinion and of subordinating reason to sharia legislation. Since most Islamic jurisprudence has followed Shafii’s position, the

Arab mind has been tied to the past, Jabiri concludes.⁵⁵

The Arab-Islamic heritage has also been compromised by certain outside cultural elements that were integrated within Arab civilization. The *Israiliyyat* (a reference to Judaic teachings) “remain to this day an inexhaustible source of the irrational in Arab religious thought, especially among the general public and in popular religious culture of Arab-Muslim societies.” In addition, certain Magian and Manichaeic beliefs, as well as Sabian doctrines and Greek philosophical ideas, have entered Arab-Muslim culture. Hermetism, a system of ideas based on Hermetic teachings, was the strongest trend that transmitted the Hellenistic, what Jabiri calls *al-aql al-mustaqeel*, or resigned or submissive reason, into Arabic culture, in particular in the form of Sufism.⁵⁶

The triumph of Greek philosophy in medieval Arab history was short lived, and Jabiri, like many other scholars, lays the blame on Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), whose writings symbolize the triumph of *al-aql al-mustaqeel*. Al-Ghazali’s theology “has left a deep wound in the Arab mind, which is still hemorrhaging to this day.” What he calls the “Arab cultural time” has remained unchanged since the age of Tadween, going over the same topics again and again, ending in stagnation and rigidity in all domains.⁵⁷

What Jabiri has done in this relentless critique of the Arab mind is to sow serious doubt about the authenticity of the Arab-Islamic heritage, and to question those, in particular the Islamists, who want to go back—back to what? He certainly does not advocate discarding the whole heritage; his purpose is “not only to integrate our national cultural history with the cultural history of

the world,” but also “to articulate the components of Arab-Islamic culture and to examine them critically, seeking to reconstruct the Arab self on new bases, free from the negative paradigms of the past instead of remaining captives to a romantic Bedouin spirit of the age of jahiliyya. Our guiding principle is to contribute to rationality in Arabic thought.”⁵⁸

Jabiri, like a number of Arab intellectuals, advocates an open-minded approach to the Arab-Islamic heritage, arguing that in the age of global consciousness, deepened by the communication revolution, Arabs and Muslims can no longer remain attached to the past. Just as in certain periods in the past their heritage assimilated elements from different cultures and was enriched by them, without losing its fundamental constituents, there is no reason why it cannot do the same in the age of globalization.

CONCLUSION

There are a few scholarly works in Arabic on globalization, mostly by economists. The rest are journalistic, rhetorical and superficial. No wonder, then, that the Arabs lack a clear perception of what globalization is all about. Some insist that it is the ideological framework of the new American imperialism. Others maintain that it is a conspiracy against Islam and Arab-Islamic culture. For many, it is the purveyor of the values of a morally corrupt West. Yet there is a minority of Arab intellectuals who realize the significance of the new world order, and who argue that if the Arabs were prudent and rational, they could reap great benefits and avoid the negative aspects of globalization.

Critics argue that the problem is not whether Arabs and Muslims shun global-

ization, but whether they are qualified and ready for it. They point out that the Arab-Muslim world is in a state of disarray and backwardness. The malaise may be a little exaggerated but it is not unfounded. High illiteracy rates, especially among women; the serious disadvantages from which women suffer; the shocking disparities between rich and poor; the corrupt authoritarian regimes; and the absence of democracy and human rights: all of these militate against the Arabs' ability to play a constructive role in the new global order. Commenting on the phenomenon of tyranny in the Arab world, Sayyid Yasin, a columnist for *Al-Ahram* newspaper, opines that perhaps it was the “Muslim society in its early phases, in which religious authority was coupled with temporal authority, and which pervaded the whole social space and became one of the primary bases of political culture,” that is responsible for the Arab world as it is today. He calls attempts by Arab governments at democratization and liberalization “cosmetics,” implying that only democratic societies that respect human rights and hold their rulers accountable will prevail. The Arab world is still living “in the climate (*ajwa*) of the Middle Ages,” he concludes.⁵⁹

Yasin asserts that so long as the Arab world is still seized by a “prohibitory mentality” (*aqliyyat al-tahrim*) that forbids freedom of thought and expression, it will remain in a state of backwardness. There is a clear call to those countries dominated by tyrannical regimes and closed minds to liberate themselves from the noose of the past and enter the new world. What is needed is a complete cultural revival that will do away with the culture of tyranny and establish a democratic culture instead.⁶⁰

Some critics of globalization use it as an expedient to renew their derision of modernity and Western civilization. They disparage rampant Western commercialism, consumerism and pornography. They regard globalization as a radical negation of national existence and an end of all human values. A prominent Egyptian writer describes the 'global village,' created by globalization, as a "unified global jungle, dominated by the fiercest, most ferocious and aggressive animals." Islamists regard modernity as the precursor of globalization. Yet they seem to benefit from its technological achievements. "Islam on Line" is a striking example of using modern electronic technology to disseminate "true Islam."

Even the Holy Quran is now on the Internet.

Arab-Islamic cultural revivalism is a defensive phenomenon; it is as old as the intrusion of Western civilization into the Arab-Muslim world. It may be a natural reaction by a weak culture faced with the hegemony of a much more advanced one. However, the Arabs and Muslims can no longer ignore modernity if they want to avoid marginalization. What is actually happening is that they are availing themselves of modern civilization slowly and in an ad hoc manner. As they proceed, they invoke pristine images of their early history, that will not be able to withstand the hegemony of globalization.

¹ See Muhammad al-Shibini, *Sira al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya al-Islamiyya ma al-Awlamah*. (Beirut: *Dar al-Ilm li al-Malayeen*, 2002), pp. 21-22.

² In Radwan al-Sayyid, *Azmat al-Fikr al-Siyasi al-Arabi* (Beirut: *Dar al-Fikr al-Muasir*, 2000), p. 194.

³ Fred Halliday, *The World at 2000: Perils and Promises* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵ Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, in *Al-'Arab wa al-'Awlamah: Buhuth wa Munaqashat* (Beirut: *Markaz wa Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya*, 1998), p. 304.

⁶ Amid Ibn Muhammad al-Sufyani, *Al-Awlamah wa Khasais Dar al-Islam wa Dar al-Kufr* (Riyadh: *Dar al-Fadila*, 2000), p. 161; cf. Quran 3:110.

⁷ *Al-Ahram*, February 8, 2004.

⁸ *The Daily Star*, September 11, 2002.

⁹ *Al-Ahram*, November 1, 2002.

¹⁰ *Al-Ahram*, January 12, 2003; October 13, 2003.

¹¹ *Al-Ahram*, March 20, 2003.

¹² See *Al-Islam wa Al-Awlamah* (Cairo: *al-Dar al-Qawmiyya al-Arabiyya*, 1999), pp. 37-39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-90.

¹⁴ The Salman Rushdie case is well known. Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi writer and novelist. Her novel, *Shame*, which depicts Muslim persecution of Bangladesh's Hindu minority and is critical of Muslim treatment of women brought forth a death threat, forcing her to flee to Sweden.

¹⁵ *Al-Islam wa al-Awlamah, op.cit.*, pp. 164-165.

¹⁶ *Al-Ahram*, April 12, 2002.

¹⁷ *Al-Awlamah wa Mawaqif al-Fikr al-Islami Minha* (Alexandria: *al-Dar al-Misriyya*, 2000), p. 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁹ *Al-Ahram*, November 1, 2003.

²⁰ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Al-Muslimun wa al-Awlamah* (Cairo: *Dar al-Tawzi wa Nashr al-Islamiyya*, 2000), pp. 21-25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-49.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-69.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 132-133.

²⁷ *Al-Ahram*, December 29, 2004.

²⁸ Muhammad Qutb, *Al-Muslimun wa al-Awlamah* (Cairo: *Dar al-Shuruq*, 2000), pp. 13; 54-55. Cf. Quran 11:118-119.

²⁹ Abd al-Aziz al-Tuwayjiri, *Al-Huwiyya wa al-Awlamah min Mandhur Haq al-Tanawu al-Thaqafi*. (Rabat: *al-Munadhama al-Islamiyya li al-Tarbiya wa al-Ulum wa al-Thaqafa*, 1997. Arabic text with English translation), p. 14.

³⁰ Ibid., p.15.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 16-18.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

³⁴ *Al-Ahram*, January 14, 2002.

³⁵ *Al-Ahram*, July 26, 2002.

³⁶ *Al-Ahram*, January 25, 2002.

³⁷ Jurj Tarabishi, *Min al-Nahda ila al-Ridda: Tamazzuqat al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya fi Asr al-Awlamah*. (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2000), pp. 148-149.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 166-168.

⁴⁰ Turki Hamad, *al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya fi Asr al-Awlamah* (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 1999), pp. 22 & 89.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 178-184.

⁴³ Hasan Hanafi and Sadeq Jalal al-Azm, *Ma al-Awlamah?* (Beirut: *Dar al-Fikr al-Muasir*, 1999).

⁴⁴ *The Daily Star*, September 13, 2002.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 23-39.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 93-93, 112.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 168-170, 199.

⁵⁰ *Ma al-Awlamah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234, 241.

⁵¹ Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, *Naqd al-Aql al-Arabi: Takween al-Aql al-Arabi* (Beirut: *Dar al-Talia*, 1984), p. 46

⁵² Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 105-106.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 147, 212-213.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 290, 334.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 192-193.

⁵⁹ Sayyid Yasin, *al-Ma'lumatiyya wa Hadarat al-'Awlamah*. (Cairo: *Nahdat Misr*; 2001), pp. 82-89.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 89-90.