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[Art & Culture](https://assignbuster.com/essay-subjects/art-n-culture/)

by Martin Kramer | | | In principle, no contradiction. Practice is something different. | | | | | | | | | |?? | | Islam vs.

Democracy | | | | Commentary | | | |[pic] | | | | In the summer of 1881, the English poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt wrote a series of essays subsequently published under the title, The | | Future of Islam.

Blunt was a high-born patron of the downtrodden, a policy intellectual of sorts who enlivened the drawing rooms | | of Victorian ministers and viceroys. He had also fallen under the spell of the forerunners of modern Islamic fundamentalism. In | | his book, Blunt argued that these thinkers had carried Islam to the brink of a great religious reformation.

Under their | | inspiration, he wrote, | | I committed myself without reserve to the Cause of Islam as essentially the “ Cause of Good” over an immense portion of the world, | | and to be encouraged, not repressed, by all who cared for the welfare of mankind. | | It fell upon England, as the world’s greatest power, to “ take Islam by the hand and encourage her boldly in the path of virtue. ” | | | | More than a century later, a frantic quest for the “ Cause of Good” in the Middle East and North Africa has again seized the West. | In an era of democratization, these lands of Islam remain an anomaly ??? a zone of resistance to the ideals that have toppled | | authoritarian regimes of the Left and the Right. For several years now, political scientists and area experts, borne along by a | | tidal wave of research grants and federally-funded initiatives, have scanned the horizons of Islam for signs of democracy. In a | | plethora of academic papers and conferences, they have speculated on the reasons for the absence of democratic movements, and | | suggested what should be done to encourage their emergence.

Suddenly, many of them reached a stunning conclusion: these movements | | have already appeared, in the guise of Islamic fundamentalism. | | | | It has been a time of fervent Western testimonials. Islam, avers a noted journalist in Foreign Affairs, is now “ at a juncture | | increasingly equated with the Protestant Reformation,” due to the growing number of Islamists who “ are now trying to reconcile | | moral and religious tenets with modern life, political competition, and free markets. What these “ supposed fanatics” really want,| | writes a leading political scientist in Ethics and International Affairs, is “ the end of corrupt, arbitrary, and unpredictable | | rule and the imposition of the rule of law and responsible government. ” The new Islamic fundamentalism should be seen “ for what it| | is,” concludes a former intelligence analyst in the Washington Post, | | a movement that is historically inevitable and politically “ tamable. Over the long run it even represents ultimate political | | progress toward greater democracy and popular government. | | These views have reverberated in the hearing rooms of Washington. The then-director of the CIA, Robert Gates, told the House | | Foreign Affairs Committee in February 1992: | | I’m not ready yet to concede that Islamic fundamentalism is, by its nature, anti-Western and anti-democratic.

There are some | | fundamentalist elements in the region ??? they’re not in power ??? that are not necessarily that way. And I think that it’s also an | | evolution. | |” I had made myself a romance about these reformers,” Wilfrid Blunt confessed fifteen years after publication of The Future of | | Islam, “ but I see that it has no substantial basis. ” Blunt was not the first Westerner to be swept off his feet, then left | | bewildered, by the promise of Islamic revival.

Since the Enlightenment broke the lock of medieval prejudice against Islam, the | | reform of Islam has been declared inevitable, even imminent, by a parade of visionaries and experts. The current representation of| | Islamic fundamentalism as a portent of democracy has opened another chapter in this cyclical saga of hope and disillusionment. | | When that chapter comes to be written, it might begin by asking how Islamic fundamentalism, still loathing the West and loathed by| | it, yet became the hope of the democratizers. |” Islam is the Solution” | | For most of the 1980s, those who saw Islamic fundamentalism for what it is saw groups as violent and dogmatic as any in the world. | | These were people who mixed nostalgia with grievance to produce a millenarian vision of an Islamic state ??? a vision so powerful | | that its pursuit justified any means. Angry believers invoked this Islam when they executed enemies of the revolution in Iran, | | assassinated a president in Egypt, and detonated themselves and abducted others in Lebanon.

Their furious words complemented their| | deeds. They marched to chants of “ Death to America” and intimidated all opponents with charges of espionage and treason. They did | | not expect to be understood, but they did want to be feared, and feared they were, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. | | | | Yet their violence failed to overturn the region. While fundamentalists did seize the state in Iran, in most Arab countries they | | lurked about the edges of politics.

They were often dangerous, and always fascinating, but they posed no mortal threat to the | | established order. | | | | By the decade’s end, however, many of these same groups had managed to transform themselves into populist movements, and even win | | mass followings. They did so by riding a huge tide of discontent, fed by exploding populations, falling oil prices, and economic | | mismanagement by the state.

While governments fumbled for solutions, the fundamentalists persuaded the growing numbers of the | | poor, the young, and the credulous that if they only returned to belief and implemented God’s law, the fog of misery surrounding | | them would lift. | | | |” Islam is the solution,” ran the fundamentalist slogan. What that meant, no one would say. The treatises of those billed as | | first-rate theoreticians seemed vague, by design.

Here and there, fundamentalists organized model communities. Although billed as | | successful experiments in self-reliance, they were actually Potemkin mosques, built and supported with money from oil-rich donors. | | Fundamentalists also organized Islamic investment banks, which were supposed to prove that market economics could flourish even | | under the Islamic prohibition of interest. The most extensive experiment in Islamic banking, in Egypt, produced Islamic financial | | scandal in fairly short order. | | | | But most of new followers read no theory and lost no money.

They stood mesmerized by the rhetorical brilliance of men like the | | Sudan’s Hasan al-Turabi, Tunisia’s Rashid al-Ghannushi, and Lebanon’s Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. These preachers did not intone | | musty Islamic polemics against the unbelievers. Often they sounded more like the tenured Left, venting professorial condemnations | | of the West’s sins. | | | | Indeed, many of them issued from the academy.

Turabi, schooled at the University of London and the Sorbonne, had been a professor | | of law and a dean; Ghannushi, a teacher of philosophy. They had overheard the West’s self-incrimination, uttered in Left Bank | | cafes and British and American faculty lounges. This they reworked into a double-edged argument for the superiority and | | inevitability of Islam, buttressed not only by familiar Islamic scripture but by the West’s own doomsday prophets, from Toynbee | | onward. These wise men of the West had confessed to capital crimes: imperialism, racism, Zionism.

If they felt the tremors of the | | coming quake, could Muslims not feel them? Those who listened long enough to words pumped from pulpit amplifiers did begin to feel| | a slight tremor, and the mosques filled to overflowing. | | | | A great deal of solid scholarship on these movements appeared during the 1980s, making it difficult to view them benignly. Their | | theories of jihad and conspiracy, embedded in wordy tracts, received critical scrutiny.

True, Edward Said, Columbia’s part-time | | professor of Palestine, presented a contrary view in Covering Islam, a book which bemoaned the Western media’s treatment of Islam. | | The book was much admired by the Islamic Jihad in Beirut, prolific deconstructionists (of U. S. embassies) who circulated it among | | Western hostages for their edification. But the violence of the fundamentalists made them a difficult sell, and when in 1989 they | | filled the streets to demand the death of Salman Rushdie, they bit the hands even of those few Western intellectuals who had tried| | to feed them.

As the decade closed, Islamic fundamentalism could count on few foreign friends. | | | | While Islam’s fundamentalists demanded the death of Rushdie, a longing for democracy (and capitalism) swept across Latin America, | | Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, rulers took fright at the scenes of revolution | | from Romania and East Germany, and proceeded to initiate tightly controlled experiments in political pluralism.

At the time, the | | architects of these experiments had no sense of the fundamentalists’ appeal; they thought that the openings would work to the | | benefit of parties advocating liberal reform. | | | | It was the fundamentalists, though, who led the dash through the newly opened door. The first of a succession of surprises had | | occurred in Egypt’s parliamentary elections in 1987, when a coalition dominated by the fundamentalist Muslim Brethren emerged as | | the biggest pposition party in a contest gerrymandered to assure victory for the ruling party. The fundamentalists also | | outdistanced all other opposition parties in the 1989 elections for Tunisia’s parliament, although a winner-take-all system gave | | every seat to the ruling party. That same year, the fundamentalists nearly captured the lower house of Jordan’s parliament, in | | that country’s first general election since 1967. Then, in 1990, the fundamentalists swept the country-wide local elections in | | Algeria. | | | Given these successes, almost overnight fundamentalist movements became the most avid and insistent supporters of free elections ???| | an unpatrolled route to the power that had hitherto eluded them. Liberal Arab intellectuals, who had lobbied for democratic | | reforms and human rights for much of the 1980s, now retreated in disarray, fearful that freer press and elections might play | | straight into the hands of fundamentalists. | | | For Western theorists of democracy, it was as if the Arabs had defied the laws of gravity. Few admitted the bind as frankly as | | Jeane Kirkpatrick, who said: | | | | The Arab world is the only part of the world where I’ve been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will | | make fundamentally rational decisions. But there, they don’t make rational decisions, they make fundamentalist ones. | Most theorists, however, refused to be shaken. In order to synchronize the Arab predicament with the march of democracy, they | | developed a convenient theory ??? the theory of initial advantage. | | | | The fundamentalists, according to this theory, enjoyed an advantage in the first stage of democratization: they knew how to | | organize, to stir emotions, to get out the vote. But “ as civil society is enlivened,” announced one political scientist, “ it is | | only natural that the influence of the Islamist groups will be challenged. Then their appeal would fade, once the people enjoyed | | a full range of options. In the privacy of the voting booth, the voters would become rational actors, and elect liberals and | | technocrats who proposed serious answers to the crisis of Arab society. | | | | Algeria’s parliamentary election, first scheduled for June 1991 and then postponed until December, was to have proved the point. | | According to the theorists, Algeria had the best chance of giving birth to a liberal democracy.

More than any other Arab country, | | Algeria enjoyed an intimate connection with Europe, and its elites were at home with the ways of the West. True, the new Algerian | | voter had already given one sweeping victory to the Islamic Salvation Front (known by its French acronym, FIS) in local elections. | | But expert opinion declared the FIS victory a “ protest” against the corruption of the ruling party, not a vote for a stern regime | | of Islamic mores. Anyway, ran the argument, the FIS had lost its initial advantage, first by mismanaging the muncipalities where | | it had assumed authority, then by backing Saddam Hussein in his Kuwait blunder. | | |” Saddam’s defeat has turned the Algerian political situation upside down,” announced L’Express, “ leaving the FIS in the worst | | position of all. ” It was safely predicted that Algerians would turn away from the sheikhs in the upcoming parliamentary election ???| | a fair and free ballot, structured in technical consultation with the best Parisian authorities in the sciences politiques. The | | FIS can now count on only a die-hard bloc of unemployed urban youths,” opined an American political scientist in the Journal of | | Democracy, who found it “ unlikely that the FIS will gain enough votes to dictate the makeup of the new government. ” Such confident| | assurances anesthetized Algeria’s elite, who secretly worshipped foreign expertise and looked surreptitiously to the foreign press| | to explain their own predicament to them. | | | Thus, Paris and Algiers were both astonished when the FIS won a landslide victory in the first round of the parliamentary | | election, nearly burying Algeria’s regime and its Westernized elite. The Sudan’s Turabi was right for once when he claimed that | | any observer with insight should have been able to predict the outcome: “ The Western media wished this not to be so, so they hid | | the facts from everyone, so the results came as a surprise. But the self-deception went beyond the media, to the battery of | | democracy doctors who had ministered to the ailing Algerian polity. Their theory of initial advantage proved to be an immense | | blind spot, large enough to conceal a near-revolution. | | | | Algeria confirmed something that had been demonstrated in study after study of fundamentalist movements: fundamentalism is no fad,| | but the preference of a generation.

It will not stop on a dime ??? on the failure of Saddam’s jihad, or the scandal surrounding | | Islamic banks in Egypt, or haphazard garbage collection in fundamentalist-run towns in Algeria. Nor do the fundamentalists now | | need a detailed plan to alleviate suffering, because they possesses potent words, and those words vest suffering with meaning. In | | a Western polity, the Pied Pipers of the disaffected young could not hope to win power in a landslide vote. But the explosion of | | the young population in the Arab world has given the affected generation an immense electoral advantage.

After Algeria’s | | parliamentary election, the bleak reality could not be denied: free elections in the Middle East and North Africa were more likely| | to produce fundamentalist rule than not. | | | | The failure to anticipate the FIS victory should have cut deeply into the credibility of Western democracy doctors, with their | | blithe promise that the fundamentalist appeal would fade in a truly free ballot. Instead, they have rebounded with a new | | discovery.

Fundamentalism, they now claim, is not destined to disappear but to triumph, because it is the yearning for democracy | | in Islamic camouflage. | | | | Those who claim credit for this discovery muster three arguments in support of their claim that Islamic fundamentalism has become | | the “ Cause of Good,” and that Islamic movements therefore deserve the sympathy the West has bestowed on democracy movements | | elsewhere. Paradoxically, each of these arguments has already been systematically refuted ??? by the fundamentalists themselves. | Islamist Contradictions | | The first argument holds that Islamic fundamentalism, whatever its past, has entered upon an evolution, and has already started to| | reconcile Islam with democratic values. As one academic apologist claims: | | Many Islamic activists have “ Islamized” parliamentary democracy, asserting an Islamic rationale for it, and appeal to democracy in| | their opposition to incumbent regimes. | The distortion here does not lie in the claim of compatibility between Islam and democracy. Although the dominant interpretation | | of Islam has historically sanctioned authoritarian rule, the reinterpretation of Islamic sources, done with enough imagination, | | could conceivably produce an opposing argument for Islamic democracy. Here and there, intrepid Muslims have searched the divine | | word of the Qur’an, the traditions of the Prophet, and the early history of Islam in order to establish the democratic essence of | | Islam, buried deep beneath the chronicles of despotism. | | | But these are not the Muslims leading the fundamentalist movements now bidding for power. Fundamentalists insist they have not | | demanded free elections to promote democracy or the individual freedoms that underpin it, but to promote Islam. Indeed, when | | leading fundamentalist thinkers do address the broader question of democracy, it is not to argue its compatibility with Islam but | | to demonstrate democracy’s inferiority to Islamic government. Such a virtuous government, they affirm, can rest only on obedience | | to the divinely-given law of Islam, the shari’a. | | | A deception lurks in any description of the fundamentalists as being committed to the rule of law, for the shari’a is not | | legislated but revealed law. As such, in the eyes of the fundamentalists it has already achieved perfection, and while it is not | | above some reinterpretation, neither is it infinitely elastic. If anything, fundamentalist exegesis has rejected reformist | | attempts to stretch the law much beyond its letter, and has even magnified the differences between Islamic and universal law. | | | At the heart of these differences reside Islamic law’s principled affirmations of inequality, primarily between Muslims and | | non-Muslims, secondarily between men and women. This has made fundamentalists into the most unyielding critics of the Universal | | Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the freedom to choose one’s religion and one’s spouse. Both freedoms indisputably | | contradict Islamic law, which defines conversion out of Islam as a capital offense, and forbids marriage between a Muslim woman | | and a non-Muslim man. In 1981, the leading fundamentalists met in Paris and put out an Islamic Universal Declaration of Human | | Rights, which omits all freedoms that contradict the shari’a. ) | | | | The shari’a, as a perfect law, cannot be abrogated or altered, and certainly not by the shifting moods of an electorate. | Accordingly, every major fundamentalist thinker had repudiated popular sovereignty as rebellion against God, the sole legislator. | | In the changed circumstances of the 1990s, some activists do allow that an election can serve a useful one-time purpose, as a | | collective referendum of allegiance to Islam, and as an act of submission to a regime of divine justice. But once such a regime | | gains power, its true measure is not how effectively it implements the will of the people but how efficiently it applies Islamic | | law. | | | The ideal of Islamic government most often evoked by the fundamentalists harks back to the rule of a just commander, ruling in | | consultation with experts in the law. There is a revulsion against the combat of parties and personalities in democratic politics,| | best expressed by the Sudan’s Turabi, fundamentalism best-known spokesman in the West. In a tract on the Islamic state, Turabi | | explains that such a state, once established, really has no need of party politics or political campaigns.

While Islamic law does | | not expressly oppose a multi-party system, | | this is a form of factionalism that can be very oppressive of individual freedom and divisive of the community, and it is | | therefore, antithetical to a Muslim’s ultimate responsibility to God. | | As for election campaigns: | | In Islam, no one is entitled to conduct a campaign for themselves directly or indirectly in the manner of Western electoral | | campaigns.

The presentation of candidates would be entrusted to a neutral institution that would explain to the people the options| | offered in policies and personalities. | | Through this elaborate hedging, Turabi arrives at a tacit justification for one-party rule, which is the actual form of government| | he now justifies and supports in the Sudan. | | | | Of the vast complex of democratic values and institutions offered by the West, the fundamentalists have thus seized upon only one,| | the free plebiscite, and even that is to be discarded after successful one-time use.

They remain ambivalent, if not hostile, | | toward party politics, and they spend much of their intellectual energy arguing that the reckless expansion of freedom can only | | harm the collective security of Islam. When asked which existing regime most closely approximates an ideal Islamic order, | | fundamentalists most often cite the governments of the Sudan or Iran ??? the first a military regime, the second a hierocracy ruled | | by an increasingly autocratic cleric, and both first-order violators of human rights. | | | The second argument holds that Islamic fundamentalism drives many movements and represents a wide spectrum of views, not all of | | them extreme. Because of its diversity, the past or present performance of fundamentalism in one setting says nothing about its | | future performance in another. And this diversity also rules out domino-like progress: the world does not face an Islamintern, but| | a variety of local movements. | | | | The concept of a iverse fundamentalism has wound its way to Washington, where it achieved full flower in a June 1992 speech by | | Edward Djerejian, then Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs: | | In countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we thus see groups or movements seeking to reform their societies in | | keeping with Islamic ideals. There is considerable diversity in how these ideals are expressed. We detect no monolithic or | | coordinated international effort behind these movements.

What we do see are believers living in different countries placing | | renewed emphasis on Islamic principles, and governments accommodating Islamist political activity to varying degrees and in | | different ways. | | This claim for the diversity of fundamentalist movements ??? again labelled expectantly as movements of “ reform” ??? is most | | convincingly countered by the fundamentalists themselves, with their uncanny knack for refuting every Western argument made on | | their behalf.

The Sudan’s Turabi again put it best, in an interview granted just after the FIS success in the first round of the | | Algerian parliamentary election. The awakening of Islam, he said, has produced a world movement notable for its uniformity. If | | there appear to be differences, it is because “ God in His wisdom is varying and distributing the phenomenon to let people know | | that it is coming everywhere at all times. | | | | The leading fundamentalists insist that their movement is pan-Islamic as a matter of principle. The borders that separate their | | countries, drawn up by European imperial fiat, do not bind them morally or limit them politically. And in practice, fundamentalist| | movements have an irresistible tendency to think and act across borders. Over the past decade, the international traffic among | | Islamic fundamentalists has grown intense.

Fundamentalist leaders jet from conference to conference to open channels that will | | assure the rapid transmission of ideas and mutual aid. They learn from one another, imitate one another, and assist one another. | | | | The greatest success of their joint efforts has been the aid they collectively mobilized for the Afghan mujahidin during the 1980s| |??? aid that included money, material, and thousands of volunteers who fought in the Islamic jihad against the Soviet occupation.

No| | less striking has been the success of the Islamic Republic of Iran in implanting the indomitable Hizbullah, a fundamentalist | | movement faithful to Iran’s revolution, on Lebanese soil, where it has waged a largely successful jihad against American, French, | | and Israeli forces. | | | | Thanks to the jet, the cassette, and the fax, pan-Islam is no longer a bogey but a growing reality. Turabi, for example, | | categorizes Islamic fundamentalism as a “ pan-national movement,” and the Sudan’s policy reflects it.

The Sudan has run Algerian | | voting data through its computers for the FIS, it has provided diplomatic passports for foreign fundamentalists, and it has | | brought the foremost fundamentalists to Khartoum to create an Islamic Arab Popular Conference, of which Turabi is secretary. Iran | | is still more active, and not only continues to finance Hizbullah in Lebanon, but includes a line item in its budget for support | | of the Palestinian Intifada ??? monies which have gone largely to fundamentalists who battle the peace process.

Visitors to Khartoum| | and Tehran are astonished at the odd mix of foreign fundamentalists who can be spotted in hotel lobbies and government ministries. | | | | There is, in short, much ado about something, part of which is visible above-board in publicized visits and conferences, part of | | which is arranged in the conspiratorial fashion mastered by the fundamentalists during their long years underground.

The | | apologists, preoccupied with imaginary changes in the substance of the fundamentalist message, overlook perhaps the most important| | transformation of all: the emergence of a global village of Islamic fundamentalism. | | | | According to the final argument, fundamentalism, whatever the dangers it might pose to freedoms or borders, still constitutes no | | real threat to Western interests or to the stability of a new world order. The fundamentalists’ goals cannot be achieved in | | defiance of the West.

States that have sold oil to the West will still sell it; states that have needed Western aid will still | | need it. Once in power, promises another Western apologist, fundamentalists will | | generally operate on the basis of national interests and demonstrate a flexibility that reflects acceptance of the realities of a | | globally interdependent world. | | But where their apologists see an interdependent world, the fundamentalists themselves see a starkly divided world.

During the | | Gulf crisis, they championed the view that any partnership between believers and nonbelievers constituted a violation of divine | | order. Therefore, while Saddam may have done wrong when he invaded Kuwait, King Fahd, who depended on American “ Crusaders” to | | defend Saudi Arabia, most certainly sinned. Ma’mun al-Hudaybi, official spokesman of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, announced | | that “ Islamic law does not permit any enlisting of assistance from polytheists [mushrikun]. According to Rashid al-Ghannushi, the| | exiled leader of the Tunisian fundamentalist movement, Saudi Arabia had committed a colossal crime. Of Saddam, no friend of Islam | | before the crisis, he said: | | We are not worshipping personalities, but anyone who confronts the enemies of Islam is my friend and anyone who puts himself in | | the service of the enemies of Islam is my enemy. | | For fundamentalists, the identity of the enemy has remained constant since Islam first confronted unbelief.

In their vision of | | interdependence, Islam will indeed sell its oil, provided that it is allowed to invest the proceeds in instruments of war that | | will enable Muslims to deter any form of Western intervention. This proliferation will eventually create a world order based not | | on American hegemony but on a restored balance of power ??? and terror. As Hizbullah’s mentor, Fadlallah, says in a transparent | | reference to military might and the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons: | | We may not have the actual power the U.

S. has, but we had the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that | | power in the future. | | This restored balance between Islam and the West excludes the intrusive existence of Israel in the lands of Islam. Unlike several | | Arab regimes and the PLO, which have grudgingly accepted the reality of the Jewish state, the fundamentalists remain | | uncompromisingly theological in their understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestine is a land sacred to Islam, a land | | stolen by the Jews. Not an inch may be alienated.

Israel is a cancer in the Islamic world, implanted by imperialism and nurtured | | by the U. S. The Jewish state has to be fought, passively through non-recognition, actively through jihad. Ibrahim Ghawsha, | | speaking for Hamas, the largest Palestinian fundamentalist movement, has drawn analogies that go beyond the usual parallel of | | Israel and the Crusaders: | | We think the conflict between the Arabs and Jews, between the Muslims and the Jews, is a cultural conflict that will continue to | | rage throughout all time. . . Algeria fought for 130 years. Even the Baltic states, which were occupied by the Soviets, have had| | their independence recognized by world states 45 years after they were occupied. The Palestine question is only [about] 40 years | | old, considering that it came into being in 1948. We are at the beginning of the road. Our adversary needs to be dealt with | | through a protracted and continuous confrontation. | This view is shared by fundamentalists of all stripes, from the many Sunni movements in the Muslim Brethren tradition to the | | Shi’ite movements that receive guidance and support from Iran. | | Imagined Islamism | | Democracy, diversity, accommodation ??? the fundamentalists have repudiated them all. In appealing to the masses who fill their | | mosques, they promise, instead, to institute a regime of Islamic law, make common cause with like-minded “ brethren” everywhere, | | and struggle against the hegemony of the West and the existence of Israel.

Fundamentalists have held to these principles through | | long periods of oppression, and will not abandon them now, at the moment of their greatest popular resonance. | | | | These principles bear no resemblance to the ideals of Europe’s democracy movements; if anything, they evoke more readily the | | atavism of Europe’s burgeoning nationalist Right. The refusal to see Islamic fundamentalism in this context, or to take seriously | | the discourse of the Islamists, is evidence of the persistent power of the West o create a wholly imaginary Islam. In this | | instance, the myth of fundamentalism as a movement of democratic reform assures the West that no society on earth has the moral | | resources to challenge the supremacy of Western values: even Islam’s fundamentalists, cursing the ways of foreigners, will end up | | embracing them. This is a reassuring gospel, but it ignores Islam as actually believed and practiced by the fundamentalists, and | | this denial has sowed the seed of a future disillusionment. | | | As for the fundamentalists themselves, they and their apologists warn against the futility of resisting the fundamentalist surge. | |” Islam is a new force that is going to come anyway, because it’s a wave of history,” Turabi assures his Western listeners, and | |” superficial obstacles will certainly not stand in the way. ” In fact, fundamentalism will triumph no matter what the West does, | | because it “ thrives” on repression. | | | But as governments do crack down on fundamentalist movements, their apologists and even their leaders have taken to pleading more | | vociferously for the deus ex machina of American intervention. The same fundamentalists who condemned Saudi Arabia’s enlisting of | | assistance from “ polytheists” would enlist some of it themselves, if they could. Their approach has been to tug at the conscience | | of the Western democracies.

In particular, they ask that the United States intervene to protect the rights of free speech and | | assembly so precious to the West, and press for free elections throughout the region. “ I am trying to tell my audiences that the | | values which are dear to them are also common to Islam,” said a disingenuous Turabi in Washington, especially citing “ free | | government based on consultation and participation. ” | | | | Until now, the fundamentalists have offered nothing in exchange for this protection.

In his policy speech on Islam in June 1992, | | Assistant Secretary Edward Djerejian expressed suspicion | | of those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to destroy that very process in order to retain power and | | political dominance. | | Yet the speech left open the possibility of an accommodation if fundamentalists ceased to be “ extreme,” and so demonstrated that | | fundamentalism’s apologists had won acceptance of their most essential point: fundamentalism is a movement of “ reform,” itself | | susceptible to reform.

With Djerejian’s speech, the United States moved, in Blunt’s formulation, “ to take Islam by the hand and | | encourage her boldly in the path of virtue. ” | | | | If those hands are joined, the overture to fundamentalism promises to be the riskiest policy venture of the next decade in the | | Middle East and North Africa.

According to one academic analyst, | | The twenty-first century will test the ability of political analysts and policymakers to distinguish between Islamic movements | | that are a threat and those that represent legitimate indigenous attempts to reform and redirect their societies. | | Would that these movements could be divided into two such broadly opposed categories.

But every movement combines threat and | |” reform” in a seamless message, and much of the supposed “ reform” is threatening as well ??? to women, minorities, and the | | occasional novelist who would write a book on Islam. Which of these movements could be trusted with power, and which would betray | | that trust at the first opportunity? No one can possibly know, because the threat that resides in fundamentalism is anchored to | | its foundations, and is liable to resurface at critical moments when the peace and stability of the region hang in the balance. | | | Political pluralism and peace do have true friends in the Middle East and North Africa. They are beleaguered and dazed by the | | generational surge of Islamic fundamentalism, and they are divided over the fate of Algeria and its implications. Some have been | | ridiculed by the democracy theorists as self-styled liberals, guilty of pedaling the view that existing governments are preferable| | to the anointed fundamentalists. But their forebodings are as justified as those of Westerners who shudder at the rise