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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 opposition 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 municipalities 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 possess 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 hierarchy 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 diverse 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

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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,

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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