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The Mountebanks & The Apostates

By Fawaz A. Gerges

Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2009), 256 pp., \$26.00.

Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 288 pp., \$26.95.

Emile Nakhleh, *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations with the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 184 pp., \$26.95.

America's bloody encounter with Islam is a failure. At heart there is an inability to understand the context and dynamics of Arab and Muslim politics; the conceptual differences and boundaries between moderate Islamists, nonviolent radical activists, local jihadists and global jihadists like al-Qaeda. For eight years, the dominant U.S. narrative blurred the lines between "Islamist," "radical," "militant," "extremist," "jihadist" and "terrorist." The United States equated Islamists' offensive speech with jihadists' violent action. But there are stark differences between locally and regionally based political groups like Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah and borderless, transnational and globalized

jihadist groups like al-Qaeda that have been waging war against the United States and its close allies since the mid-1990s.

Scholars of the Greater Middle East like Georgetown's John Esposito and Michael Hudson, Harvard's Roger Owen, Richard Norton at Boston University, Richard Bulliet and Rashid Khalidi at Columbia, along with Mohammed Ayoob of Michigan State and many others were systematically marginalized from decision making, replaced by a motley gang of irresponsible ideologues, security types and other mountebanks.

Terrorism experts and crusading commentators—including Rohan Gunaratna, best-selling author of *Inside Al Qaeda*; counterterrorism consultant Evan F. Kohlmann; investigative journalist Steven Emerson; academic Daniel Pipes and others—are partly to blame. Instead of adopting a more constructive approach—one that draws distinctions between the many faces of political Islam—they took the easier, reductionist approach of lumping all Islamists together. They looked backward and pigeonholed mainstream and militant Islamists through the prism of al-Qaeda. These observers, wittingly or unwittingly, endorsed the official agenda by portraying Islamism not just as jihadism, a borderless, transnational violent fringe, but also as a mortal threat to the West, an aggressive and totalitarian ideology dedicated to random destruction and global subjugation. Still others advocated an all-out war against any manifestations of political Islam.

Building on this consensus of uninformed pundits and social engineers, President

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Bush ratcheted up the rhetoric, grouping all mainstream and militant Islamists together under the phrase “Islamofascists.” He called on Americans to be prepared for a global war on terror, the “inescapable calling of our generation.”

The global war on terror, Bush said, would eradicate the threat of Islamic-radical terrorism (again, a loose and incoherent term) and target rogue states that sponsored terrorism or offered lodging to terrorists. With sweeping, ideological language, Bush and Cheney’s crusade set the stage for the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, which was costly in blood and treasure and damaging to America’s moral standing in the world.

According to multiple surveys and studies, the expansion of the war on terror outside Afghanistan alienated Muslims and provided ideological motivation to al-Qaeda and global jihadists. They portray their fight against the United States as a defense of the Muslim *ummah*, or community, worldwide. And so, in the eyes of many Muslims, America’s war on terror is a war against their religion. A war designed to subjugate their countries. Few buy the Washington narrative regarding the promotion of democracy and liberty in the Middle East, viewing it instead as a mask to perpetuate U.S. dominance.

There is no denying that America’s global war on terror has been a disaster and that there is an urgent need to rethink the country’s relations with the Muslim world. In an informative and revealing book, *A Necessary Engagement*, Emile Nakhleh, a for-

mer director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program in the CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence, says that although midlevel U.S. officials knew better than to frame the war in black-and-white terms, ever-expanding the territory of the enemy, they had little say and input in decision making. A disconnect existed between the first and second tiers of the Bush foreign-policy team in terms of access to intelligence and scholarly knowledge. Nakhleh’s insider account puts to rest the claim by Bush and Cheney that they, like the policy establishment, were misled and misinformed by the intelligence community.¹

Nakhleh paints a grim and stark portrait of the failures of U.S. policy makers to understand the most basic attitudes that Muslims have of themselves, each other and the West. He is bitter about the resistance of senior Bush officials to learning about the complexity and diversity of religiously based movements in the Muslim world, despite the numerous efforts he and top CIA analysts undertook to better guide them.

One of Nakhleh’s central arguments is that there are qualitative, dramatic differences and distinctions between bin Laden’s violent global jihadists and mainstream political-Islamist parties with a huge so-

¹ On the Iraq threat, for example, Nakhleh writes that before and during the invasion, “briefings informed the administration that defeating Saddam’s army and toppling his regime were not the real challenge to the United States; planning for the ‘morning after’ was the true challenge.”

cial base, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Nakhleh argues that while the former should be confronted and excluded, the latter “should be welcomed as potentially credible partners in the political transformation of their societies.”

Instead, the Bush team viewed the Muslim world with its 1.4 billion citizens through “the prism of terrorism,” lumping al-Qaeda terrorists with religious activists who have shown “their commitment to the democratic process and their pragmatic approach to politics and political change.” According to Nakhleh, this was the worst thing the United States could do. Conflating all those religiously oriented actors, as the Bush administration did, and declaring all-out war against them is a recipe for failure and perpetual conflict with important segments of Muslim societies.

In a revealing interview with an Arabic newspaper, *Al Hayat*, Nakhleh says he tried but failed to convince his superiors in the Bush administration to engage Hamas after it won the 2006 parliamentary elections. The dominant official view opposed talking to Hamas leaders unless they radically shifted their stance on Israel.

The alternative, notes Nakhleh, is for the Obama administration to rethink the Bush approach, because there can be no stability or real political reform in the region without engaging Hamas, Hezbollah and like-minded organizations. These influential social movements have evolved politically and gained public legitimacy at home at the expense of secular parties and extremist groups alike.

Al-Qaeda, however, is a different beast. Understanding the nature of the beast—al-Qaeda’s global jihad—is the focus of *How to Win a Cosmic War* by Reza Aslan, a gifted young author who teaches creative writing at the University of California, Riverside. Like Nakhleh, Aslan draws distinctions between religious nationalists (mainstream religious activists) and transnational jihadists (the bin Laden types), situating the rise of the latter in the context of fundamental societal shifts within Muslim societies in conjunction with globalization.

Jihadism, writes Aslan, is the “child of globalization” because it “relies for its very existence on a world without borders, a world in which no barrier exists between religion and politics, between the sacred and the secular.” Globalization has accelerated the erosion of nationalism as the principal indicator of collective identity, and no force exerts greater pull than religion when it comes to the power of transnational identities to challenge nationalist ones.

According to Aslan, the global jihadist movement cannot be fully understood without focusing on globalization and how that has changed the way people define themselves as individuals and as part of society: “Old demarcations . . . are slowly starting to give way, [and] religion can no longer be viewed as simply a set of myths and rituals to be experienced in the private realm. Religion is *identity*.”

In this vein, the goal of bin Laden and his cohorts is to bring their adherents under a banner of one single, collective

identity irrespective of race, culture or gender. They seek to do so by using a popular cause or injustice that resonates widely among Muslims—whether it be the plight of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation; the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam; or the American invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Jihadists, Aslan argues, fully exploit local and global grievances and resentments in an effort to portray the conflicts between Muslims and Westerners “as part of a cosmic battle between the forces of Truth and Falsehood, Belief and Unbelief, Good and Evil that all Muslims,” regardless of where they live, “must join.”

Aslan’s “cosmic war” is an eternal, absolute struggle, not a winnable war, but a war of the jihadist imagination—a conflict over identity. Unfortunately today, the United States and the jihadists are actively engaged in that war, concludes Aslan soberly. He counsels U.S. policy makers against falling into the trap that jihadists dug for them—waging a senseless, costly and counterproductive conflict. For “in the end, there is only one way to win a cosmic war: refuse to fight in it.”

In Aslan’s opinion, a more constructive way to confront al-Qaeda’s global jihadists is to strip their organization of public appeal and deny them their principal argument that the war on terror is in fact a “war against Islam.”



To outwit the jihadists and other marginalized guerrilla groups requires a complete reorientation and transformation of U.S. policy, argues Juan Cole—a leading historian of Islam and author of the widely read blog *Informed Comment*. In a provocative and sweeping book, *Engaging the Muslim World*, he calls for sustained and broader engagement with the Greater Middle East based on mutual interests and a full understanding of the region’s politics, society and culture. The region is and will be pivotal to U.S. security, in terms of energy, terrorism and even our public perceptions of one another.

Cole does not mince words about neo-



conservatives who hijacked U.S. policy during the Bush administration, using the politics of fear to carry out their expansionist agenda. In fact, taking on the neocons cost him tenure at Yale.² And he pulls no punches here. By conflating legitimate Islamic political activism with bin Laden's terrorism, the Bush ideologues fueled a powerfully irrational "Islam Anxiety" that resonated with many Americans. Cole traces the origin of this phenomenon to U.S. dependence on oil from the Gulf: "Our need for foreign sources is a security issue. . . . And yet our energy dependence on the Muslim world generates a good deal of Islam Anxiety."

The deliberate misinterpretation of Arab and Muslim politics fed a false impression that a majority of Sunni Arabs are fundamentalist and that "they might even try to erect an al-Qaeda state that would strike at the U.S. mainland." Americans were told that their warriors were fighting in Iraq to prevent al-Qaeda and its affiliates from striking at U.S. supermarkets and neighborhoods.

Islam Anxiety, Cole contends, is an in-

vented monolith that encompasses widely differing political actors that have little in common with one another—Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis, Iraq's secular Baathists and religious fundamentalists, the Iranians writ large, the Taliban and the Pashtun tribes in Pakistan-Afghanistan, and the global entity al-Qaeda. Cole systematically dismantles the Islam Anxiety bogeyman, breaking it down and showing that differences and disagreements within Muslim politics are much more important than supposed solidarities.

For example, al-Qaeda's stated goal is to

² After the faculty offered him a chair, there was a storm of protests by neocons and Israel supporters who launched a powerful and effective campaign to discredit Cole and raised doubts about the rigor of his scholarship and his radical politics (meaning his critical views of Israeli policies). They prevailed on the board of trustees and the administration to withdraw the offer. Cole now has tenure at the University of Michigan.

overthrow the pro-American Saudi monarchy and replace it with a more authentic religiously based state. In contrast, since the late 1960s the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood has renounced the use of violence in the service of politics and has accepted the rules of the political game. There is also a fierce rivalry between Shia-dominated Iran and Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia polarizing the entire region along sectarian lines. How, then, can the two groups be cut from the same cloth?

Cole too punches holes in America's Islam Anxiety over Afghanistan and Pakistan and draws clear distinctions between the Taliban and al-Qaeda's global jihadists. Regardless of how one views the regressive and reactionary Taliban, its focus is limited to Afghanistan and Pakistan; the group has shown no interest in waging a transnational, borderless war like al-Qaeda does. By conflating potential negotiating partners with violent fanatics, our myopic interpretation of the Islamist threat has now moved firmly into South Asia.

According to Cole, making matters worse, America's fear of an imminent extremist takeover in Pakistan also stems from the lack of distinction between rural and urban publics and their political beliefs and preferences. Time and again, the urban population has voted against fundamentalist groups (including in the most recent elections).

Though Pakistan faces grave challenges because of internal ruptures, differing ideological conceptions among the dominant elite, vast socioeconomic disparities in the sixth-most populous country in the world,

and an almost-bankrupt and -failed state, America is exacerbating regional extremism. We are not an innocent bystander in the unfolding tragedy in Pakistan:

Both urban and rural dissidents profoundly resented American backing for Musharraf, seeing the Bush administration as an impediment to political change. America was coded as standing for arbitrary decree as opposed to rule of law and for brutal repression as opposed to political compromise.

The Bush administration's blind support for Musharraf almost to the very end fueled the country's crisis and played into the hands of the Pakistani Taliban: "The pressure the United States has put on the military to attack other Pakistanis in the northwest inspires nationalist objections, even from middle-class people that have no sympathy for the Pakistani Taliban." Our continued involvement has only served to worsen the violence.

There is a real danger that

the immensity of the U.S. and NATO footprint in this fiercely proud tribal Muslim region may actually be creating the threat it ostensibly seeks to avoid: the reconstitution of al-Qaeda and the revival of the 1980s discourse on holy war that proved so deadly to the Soviet Union.

In Afghanistan, Cole cautions American policy makers against equating the independent-minded Pashtun tribes with the Taliban. Again we see the misperception in American politics that all Muslim fighters are motivated by the same brand of extrem-

ism: “The conflation of Pushtuns, and their love of relative autonomy, with Talibanism frequently obscures the local politics that drive militancy.” The remedy is to provide development aid that supports civilian politics and lifts the Afghans out of extreme poverty (a leading driver in the Taliban’s recruitment of fighters) and to reach a negotiated settlement with the Pashtun tribes. The Pashtuns are key to peace; they fight foreign troops only because it gives them a real stake in the political and economic order. By creating a viable armistice, the Pashtuns will be one less armed force the United States must face in the region. Otherwise we are bound to make the same mistake—fighting our enemies and our possible allies—much as we did with al-Qaeda and more moderate local political groups.

Cole does not buy the strategy of military escalation against the Taliban in Afghanistan, though I am confident he will approve of Obama’s focus on foreign aid to local communities and ordinary people:

It is unlikely that a foreign military force could repress rebellious Pushtun tribes by main force. Afghanistan is a big, rugged country, and much of the population is organized by clan and tribe. It has never had a strong centralized government, and the last regime that even attempted such a thing was probably the communists of the 1980s, who were overthrown by angry mujahideen and executed.

But in the end, arguments on violent extremism always return to the Middle East. More than anything else, Cole rightly asserts that helping to engineer an Arab-Is-

raeli settlement would defuse “90 percent” of America’s Islam Anxiety. Let’s face facts: we certainly won’t be getting rid of the root cause—our oil dependence—any time soon. Other avenues must be found. Similarly, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq “would reduce America Anxiety in the Muslim world and would eliminate a prime cause of Islam Anxiety for the American public. . . .”

Of the three books, Cole’s is the most critically rigorous and empirically informed. Agree or disagree, one cannot ignore Cole’s historically and sociologically driven analysis and moral courage.

Reaching consensus, a former senior CIA analyst, a leading scholar on Islamic politics and a young writer provide ample evidence of the urgent need to steer the American ship of foreign policy in a different direction. With a new, visionary president in the White House, the three books could not have come out at a better moment.

While Obama has not yet crafted all of his policies toward the Greater Middle East, his rhetoric borrows a page or two from the authors’. First, he has made clear he sees America as at war with extremism, not Islam.

The United States will no longer view Muslims through the prism of terrorism, he told starstruck Turkish parliamentarians in April: “America’s relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual re-

spect.” He mentioned the Muslims in his family, a topic he avoided back home in his presidential campaign, to connect personally with his foreign audience.

Reaching out to Arabs and Muslims further, Obama promised in the same speech to press for the creation of a viable Palestinian state and to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, a pivotal fault line in the region: “The United States strongly supports the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. . . . That is a goal that I will actively pursue as president. . . .”

On June 4 in Cairo, Obama hammered home his commitment to these two key principles. Although only a statement of intentions, the address sent a clear message:

I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap,

and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

Most groundbreaking and most startling were Obama’s talking points on the specifics.

Of all sitting U.S. presidents, only Obama has spoken so explicitly and eloquently about the suffering of the Palestinian people—Muslims and Christians—in the pursuit of a homeland:

For more than 60 years they’ve endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations—large

and small—that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.

And again, of all sitting U.S. presidents,



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only Obama has so closely and organically linked the construction of a Palestinian state to America's strategic interests: "That is in Israel's interest, Palestine's interest, America's interest, and the world's interest. And that is why I intend to personally pursue this outcome with all the patience that the task requires."

Those are powerful, symbolic words delivered by the president of the world's most powerful country—and Israel's most pivotal patron. They will resonate among Arabs and Muslims.

Unlike his predecessor, Obama did not mention the word terrorism or the war on terror once. He rightly talked about extremism, a common denominator in many societies. He too addressed the causes that fuel and sustain it. Unlike our presidential preacher George W. Bush, Obama talked about partnership. A refreshing departure from the crusading moralism of Cheney & Co.

Although President Obama did not apologize for America's mistakes, he was critically reflective. He compared and contrasted the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and said that while the United States invaded Afghanistan out of necessity, "Iraq was a war of choice that provoked strong differences in my country and around the world,"

implicitly reminding his audience that he himself opposed the Iraq War.

As Obama recognizes, the speech is part of a concerted effort to undo the damage done in the last seven years of the Bush administration and repair the broken bridges of trust with Muslim societies. He knows he faces complex challenges.

Will Obama be able to translate his positive rhetoric into concrete policy initiatives? Will he invest his precious political capital in brokering a peace settlement between Arabs and Jews? Will he extract U.S. troops from Muslim lands?

If Obama carries out his vision, constructively tackling thorny conflicts in the region, he will be remembered as the president who won Muslim hearts and minds and dealt a final blow to extremism and bin Ladenism.

If he does not, the cosmic war will likely intensify and expand, to the detriment of both civilizations. □

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