

**The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic
Foreign Policy in a World of States**

Naveed S. Sheikh

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This book, in the words of its author, is the outcome of a protracted intellectual engagement with Islam in world affairs and an attempt to unravel the semantics of civilizational categories (p. 1). Using seemingly Islamic raw material, it incorporates postmodern and identity political analysis, as well as the realist and functionalist investigative tools of social theory, in order to offer a critical study of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) – the interactive “arena” of self-neutralizing pathological Muslim states.

The book comprises four chapters plus a concluding summary. Chapter 1 consists of a critical introductory section to the nature of the “problem,” and a literature review that links Islam to the contemporary international relations (IR) discourse and emphasizing its salience. Chapter 2 outlines the pan-Islamic paradigmatic and historical contexts in which the idea of

the OIC was conceived and implemented, and points out the interplay of national interests and transcendental religious imperatives. Chapter 3 challenges the myth of Islamic monolithism. Through a policy analysis of case studies of three key Muslim states (viz., Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan), Sheikh attempts to highlight how each state manipulates the OIC in pursuit of its self-defined self-interest. Finally, chapter 4 seeks to mitigate the previous chapter's hard-nosed geopolitical realist analysis by engaging in the paradigmatic and methodological debates surrounding religious self-identity in foreign policy.

The study adopts an "eclectic" methodology that proclaims no specific adherence to any dominant IR research paradigm (p. 19). It seeks to construct/conceptualize the Islamic narrative as derived from classical theological and jurisprudential treatises, both modified and reapplied in the course of modern history. Subsequently, it attempts to deconstruct this narrative in light of the "true-life" state policy of each case study. Finally it reconstructs the IR discipline by resorting to a sociological understanding of foreign policy that integrates soft ideational and hard material factors (p. 18).

For a work that claims to be "about Islam" (p. 5), one would have expected Sheikh to (re)construct the Islamic narrative rather than deconstruct it while reconstructing western social theory. One cannot but wonder if such is how a work about Islam ought to be, for what is at stake here is not Sheikh's critique of Muslim states' policies or of the OIC (much of which is sound, warranted, and insightful), but basically the consolidation of the power hierarchy's binary relationship between social theory and Islamic narratives. The study's final analysis asserts that while Islam may have had to struggle throughout its history with inadequate institutions, its passions are bound to withstand the ongoing political challenges of a secular world (p. 141). In order to defend Islam, this rather typical and perceived laudable mode of religio-political correctness and defensiveness seeks to blame Muslims and their "inadequate" institutional and pseudo-institutional structures. This is a conventional Muslim form of self-deprecating, self-defeating deconstructive shielding discourse. After all, the implication of such a claim is that Islam has almost always been a failure, a let-down, while many others have supposedly succeeded elsewhere.

The New Politics of Islam is an ironic title for a book claiming that there are no Islamic – but only national – politics. Moreover, while some countries have fared better than others in guarding their independence, Sheikh lumps together Saudi Arabia, which "owes its very existence ... to Western policy" (p. 46) and the client state of Pakistan on the one hand,

and Iran on the other, as cases of failed Islamic policies. While rarely have the two former states been an Islamic inspiration to Muslims, Iran constitutes an atypical case both in terms of its policy and polity.

This may be judged not by any exhaustive analysis of the structure and process of the Iranian political system, but by the significant errors of omission (and commission) that Sheikh seemed obliged to make in order to fit that country into his deconstructive framework. For instance, he states that Ayatollah Khomeini blocked sending members of the Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon to fight the Israelis during the 1982 invasion not only because of politico-geographical pretexts, but, more importantly, on “ethnic” grounds. The Iranians were not supposed to do “a job that the Arabs themselves should do,” Khomeini is quoted as saying (p. 71). That Iran, despite its war with Iraq, actually did send Revolutionary Guards to train and support the Lebanese resistance – something Hezbollah can vouch for – is ignored. The Ayatollah’s statement about the “Arabs” may have been nothing more than an emphasis on the importance of indigenous grass-roots resistance rather than an ethnic, and therefore un-Islamic, “hot air” policy statement (p. 71). After all, when Ayatollah Khomeini was asked, during his trip back to Iran from exile, about what he felt while returning to his home country, his answer was “nothing.” One need not conclude that he had no feelings toward Iran, but perhaps should look for a deeper meaning and a broader frame of understanding. Opting to talk about identity politics is no inherent reason to introduce the “ethnic” magic word where it does not belong.

Sheikh also seems to have a fuzzy idea about the relationship between universalism and particularism. He claims that Iran’s Islamo-centric foreign policy pretensions were “unashamedly stripped” when, in some instances (e.g., Afghanistan), it preferred New Delhi to Islamabad. He retracts, however, by observing that Iran was seeking to contain American-Saudi penetration on its eastern front (p. 97). Islamic universalism does not necessarily preclude the particularities of politics or geostrategic calculations, as seems to be implied. After all, the American position with respect to Islam is well known, while that of Saudi Arabia is one where “division (of Muslims and/or Arabs) rather than unification, had always been the preferred way to maintain leverage” (p. 34).

Nevertheless, the author is to be commended for baring and exposing the OIC’s shortcomings. His case-study critiques served as a way to reveal the organization’s failures. His study may have been more consistent, however, had it attempted to reconstruct what it initially sought to decon-

struct: the Islamic narrative. Sheikh has largely done the opposite. Seeking to undo the semantics of civilizational categories, he has instead deconstructed and blocked an Islamic narrative in favor of constructing and promoting another dominating discourse. For all intents and purposes, this may be the very root cause of civilizational tension.

Amr G. E. Sabet
Visiting Senior Lecturer, Department of Public Management
Vaasa, Finland