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The Role of Moderate Islamic Groups in Easing the Severity of the Decline
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Introduction

The strength of a nation or society is the degree to which its citizens enjoy freedom and political rights. In society of the 21st century, real power stems from knowledge, which becomes possible when there is real human freedom. Progress flows from up-to-date knowledge and the extent to which the tools of knowledge are developed.

Freedom and talk of freedom remain a sensitive topic in the Arab and Islamic worlds due to the practices of the ruling political elites. In addition, some traditional or nontraditional social forces are blocking the achievement of transparency—transparency that can unlock the potential of Muslims. There is a deliberate absence of knowledge and an attempt to intervene in the details of knowledge, which further sets back the Arabs and Muslims in the world of knowledge and information. The lack of access to the Internet in the Arab world is the most obvious example in this regard. It stems from a fear of the spread of knowledge and of the raising of awareness.

The world of Muslims today is one of intolerance, a disconnect between the intellect and emotions, despotic rulers and autocrats, disparities, and a lack of transparency and participation.

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[1] [Executive Director of the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue]

Islamic and Arab societies raise the banner of Islam in an attempt to make Islam govern every matter down to the smallest. However, they act contrary to Islam's values of tolerance, acceptance of others, knowledge, etc. This creates a backward social environment ruled by traditions and customs. An attempt is made to imbue these customs and traditions with Islam. Actions and ideas in such an environment stem from the logic of the environment's backwardness, resulting in a poverty of ideas, a complicated social identity, lagging educational systems, and autocratic political leaderships. All of this affects the social segments in society, including the Islamic and opposition groups. Even the Islamic groups that believe in democracy lack the knowledge and basic skills for administrative, leadership, and institutional activity needed to form the primary components of a civil society environment.

U.S. policies toward the region have erred grossly by supporting autocratic regimes and focusing on economic reforms and peace and stability instead of political reforms and the spread of democracy as U.S. policies have done in Southeast Asia for example.

U.S. policies are characterized by double standards. They reject true political dialogue with Islamic groups that believe in democracy, human rights, etc. There is a fundamental contradiction in the relationship between America and Muslims. It has nothing to do with democracy and modernity, but rather with each side's policies and positions toward each other. On the one hand, Washington desires to democratize and reform the region. On the other hand, it fears that democratization and reform will provide an opening for the Islamic groups that are most hostile to U.S. policies in the region.

The Arab governments are demanding a major role for Washington in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the same time, they do not accept an American role in democratization, reform, and promoting a political opening. Rather, these governments realize and play upon American fears of democratic transformations in the region.

Moderate Islamic groups and advocates of democracy are pleased with U.S. pressure on Arab and Islamic governments. They believe that such pressure weakens these governments and demonstrates their illegitimacy. However, moderate Islamic groups show no willingness to work with American solutions. Nor are they doing anything to influence or develop these solutions.

The moderate Islamic groups are the most damaged by this contradiction and by their own inability to reconcile the secular with the Islamic regarding democracy or to take a distinct middle line between the two strong parties (America and the Arab and Islamic governments) to reduce the severity of the contradiction in the relationship or to precisely define what they want from Washington.

Let me stress in this introduction that I am not a specialist in this subject. Many academic studies treating this subject have appeared, especially in the last two or three years. I present here only general remarks on the general pathological symptoms common to the Islamic countries. These symptoms are the main indicators of the backwardness, chaos, and crisis in the Islamic world. My remarks are cursory and do not

constitute an in-depth explanation or analysis that does justice to the variation in the social and historical genesis of the regions comprising the Islamic world.

In addition, my remarks do not focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict. That conflict was a catalyst that has been transformed into a key factor because of the disarray in U.S. policy. Nor do my remarks address the notion of "why do they hate us" expressed by the two sides. These issues have been saturated by discussion and analysis, and any remarks I could offer thereon would merely repeat what has already been said.

My remarks are based on my writings, which have appeared in the Arabic press and in papers and books. They also derive from my administration of the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue and meetings at Arab and Islamic academies inside and outside the Islamic world.

This paper will also examine the political background of relations between Islamic groups and the United States, the social background of the crisis of thought and identity, and the emergence of extremist Islamic groups. I will focus on the problem of education given my 15 years of experience in university education. I will then discuss the American factor, which is the second party in the relationship. I will present examples of progressive efforts, such as those of the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue and some facts and information on Iraq based on my visit there and ongoing contacts. Finally, I will present my summary, recommendations, and sources.

2. Historical Background of American-Islamic Political Relations

We can distinguish three distinctive stages in American-Islamic political relations in the past five decades. The first stage begins in the 1950s with the expansion of communism throughout the world. The Islamic countries in general (and Islamic movements in particular) were very hostile toward the communists. Accordingly, the Muslims' inclination toward the West at that time is more understandable. The relationship hit some minor turbulence, such as the Shah's overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran, or the convulsions in the Middle East that accompanied the liberation of Iraq from Britain. However, these tensions did not affect the course of relations between the two sides. The relationship was in fact characterized by several positive developments, such as Washington's sympathy with the Algerian revolution[1] and its support of Egypt in the 1956 tripartite aggression, when President Dwight Eisenhower compelled Britain, France, and Israel to withdraw from Egypt. By contrast, the 1970s saw international tension in American-Islamic relations, with the Indian-Pakistani War and the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1967. However, these international convulsions did not cause a collapse in relations between the two sides. Rather, they had a positive effect. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brothers were closer to American positions. The Islamic group in Pakistan was sympathetic to Washington. The October War and the oil crisis in the early 1970s provided another dimension to American-Islamic relations. There was a mutual attraction following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which emerged in the

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[1] [Footnote numbers appear as they do in the original, although the footnotes are not provided in the original—translator]

form of effective cooperation between Islamists and America in their struggle against the Soviet Union over Afghanistan.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in the late 1970s and its repercussions in the Islamic countries marked the start of the second stage in American-Islamic relations. This stage was characterized by the complicated situation of Iran. Washington had supported the Shah, but the message of the revolution was an Islamist-leftist synthesis within the Islamic movement. This placed this movement squarely at odds with Washington. The revolution also affected Islamic movements in the region, giving a major boost to popular momentum that took shape in positions hostile to the Americans. Washington's increased support (after the revolution in Tehran) for dictatorial and reactionary regimes in the region—e.g., Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others—and its positive position (even if encouraged by Paris) on the military coup in Algeria, when the second round of elections in 1991 was canceled, created objective factors that poisoned the American-Islamic relationship.

The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in the 1980s reflected the success of tactical cooperation between the United States and the Muslims in expelling the Russians from Afghanistan. However, at the same time, it gave rise to a feeling that if a great power such as the Soviets could be overcome, other powers, such as the United States, could also be vanquished.

This feeling coexisted with the complications of the Kuwait War in 1991. Such expressions as "return of the crusaders to the region" and other such expressions emerged in the rhetoric of the Islamic movements. Other problems included the economic boycott of Iraq and the repercussions of the Arab-Israeli conflict. All these factors shook and moreover severed relations between the Islamic peoples and the Americans in the 1990s. The collapse of the socialist camp and the retreat of Europe's role in the region sharpened the contradiction between popular Islamic positions and U.S. policy, paving the way for a situation of extreme polarization devoid of any middle ground.

Washington had clear reservations about dealing with the Islamists. These reservations stemmed primarily from America's belief that the Islamic movements did not believe in democracy. As Judith Miller states, "Any individual or government characterized [by] political pluralism must [not] be complacent with the rise of militant Islamic groups. Islam is incompatible with these values, as shown by the continued oppression of women and minorities." She goes on to say, "Trying to distinguish between good and bad Islamic groups may be convenient for U.S. policymakers, but it is impossible to determine which ones will keep their promises of democracy and human rights. In practice, few do.**2**"[1]

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[1] The original English quote is as follows: "Any individual or government concerned with pluralism, democracy and human rights must not be complacent about the rise of militant Islamic groups. Islam is incompatible with these values--as shown by the continued oppression of women and minorities in Muslim societies. Support for democratic elections in the Middle East is thus contradictory, because radical Islamic fundamentalists, who are most likely to come to power, have no commitment to democracy. Trying to distinguish between good and bad Islamic groups may be convenient for U.S. policymakers, but it is

Washington's support of Paris regarding the cancellation of the second round of Algerian elections, Washington's bias toward Israel, and Israel's refusal to comply with UN resolutions without being compelled to comply as Iraq was have led Islamic movements to perceive a clear double standard in U.S. policy. This doubled standard has complicated and poisoned relations between the Americans and the Islamic groups. The key factor in this double standard is perhaps Washington's permitting of the establishment of democracies in several Islamic countries—e.g., Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and others—and the denial of democracy to the Arabs. National Security Agency Directive 97[3] of June 13, 1983[1] calls only for stability and peace in the Middle East, whereas America's foreign policy encourages the spread of democracy in the South Asian countries. This discrepancy has deepened the hostility of popular Islamic groups toward America's immoral positions, as characterized by the U.S. double standard.[4, 5]

The bulk of U.S. concern in the second stage focused on economic reforms. The United States totally disregarded political reforms or lacked an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of the complex social dimension. Developments in information technology and communications came to play a major role in globalization, which has had enormous effects in generating new developments for the Americans regarding values, culture, and society, which Muslims regard as alien penetrations. These developments have altered many strategic concepts compared to the Cold War period.

The events of September 11, 2001 can be regarded as the beginning of the third stage and the full collapse of American-Islamic relations. In this stage, suspicion and distrust have increased in the relationship between the two sides.

America and the West fear Islam. They imagine it as a danger surrounding Western civilization. Arab and Islamic societies and communities are extremely distrustful and sensitive regarding U.S. initiatives in the region. We are still at the beginning of this new stage. There is much polarization and little mutual attraction between the two sides. It is thus difficult to clearly predict how matters will evolve.

3. The Muslim Side of the Relationship

Our examination of the social background will be very cursory due to the complexity of the situation and the geographical expanse of the Islamic world. We will focus here on characteristics that are clearly shared by all Muslims.

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impossible to determine which ones will keep their promises of democracy and human rights. In practice, few do." (Source: http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930301faessay5173/judith-miller/the-challenge-of-radical-islam.html)]

[1] [The author is apparently referring to "National Security Decision Directive 99 - United States Security Strategy for the Near East & South Asia, July 12, 1983," a heavily redacted version of which is available at http://www.gulfinvestigations.net/IMG/pdf/iraq21.pdf]

Islamic societies are living in a state of obvious social apostasy given the violent internecine wars and conflicts which they suffer. The *Peace Research Quarterly* states that 23.2 percent of the Islamic countries were involved in conflicts between 1915 and 1988, and 24.7 percent of those conflicts occurred between 1990 and 1998.[6]

The rate of illiteracy is increasing. More than 60 million in the Arab world are illiterate, 44 million of them women.[7] The rate of computer illiteracy is one of the highest in the world. There are 18 computers per 1000 persons in the Arab world, compared to the global average of 78.3 computers per 1000 persons.[8] Only 6.1 percent of the 280 million Arabs have access to the Internet, compared to 70 percent in Britain and 79 percent in the United States.[9] "Reporters Without Borders" issued its first *Worldwide Index* in 2002 regarding freedom of the press in the countries of the world. Not one Arab country is among the first 50 countries on the list. Lebanon is 56 on the list of freedom of the press, Syria is 126, Tunisia is 128, Libya is 129, and so on.[10]

These figures and the figures of the Human Development Index for 2000 (per capita income, economic development, etc.), reflect the magnitude of the crisis of Arab and Islamic societies and the role played by these shortcomings in the cultural, scientific, educational, economic, etc. decline in the Arab and Islamic worlds. This decline has entrenched social stagnation and stunted maturation. These developments have complicated social identity and the intellectual dimension, which has in turn influenced Islamic discourse. In addition, education and educational processes have also deteriorated, which has greatly impacted awareness.

a. Social Background:

A lack of human resources and an abundance of natural resources in some areas and the converse in other areas characterize the demographic map of the Islamic peoples. This imbalance in the Arab world threatens to give rise to disturbances and conflicting viewpoints. The first Gulf War demonstrated the discrepancy between the views of non-Gulf Arabs and Gulf Arab, with its resulting extreme sensitivity and even alienation and hatred.

The Islamic peoples are experiencing civilizational stress, an intellectual and cultural vacuum, and a state of agitated emotions, which make them easily excitable. They also suffer from extreme backwardness and ignorance, which is only natural given the civilizational crisis that they are experiencing. Their understanding and knowledge of political matters is narrow. These peoples live in a state of abstract generalization. They are spectators. They view matters from a single angle. They are not comprehensive in their outlook, which makes them judgmental.

This political backwardness provides fertile ground for belief in conspiracy theories. The Islamic peoples believe that all of the political problems and crises in the Islamic world are by the design of outside powers and colonialism. They are wrong in most cases. Such conspiracy theories make it easy to evade responsibility by delusively magnifying the enemy and his capabilities. This provides the Islamic peoples with an excuse not to

confront the enemy or to refrain from taking any action to rise to the level of the enemy's thinking. They forget that the key in dealing with the "external enemy" is that he is human and thus does not act contrary to his own interests. True, there are external influences and schemes. However, they do not intrude on every minute detail of life. The weakness afflicting the Arab and Islamic peoples must be diagnosed. If not for this weakness, the situation would not have reached this state of decline; foreign schemes would not have succeeded, and the divisions between peoples and their leaders would not have grown as they have. A simple example of this is as follows: Most of the extremist Islamic groups believe that the work of the enlightened Islamists is a cover for U.S. domination, and any talk about modernity is a new American tool for influencing the Islamic world. This view is marred by defects, many fallacies, and a lack of realism. More importantly, it is influenced by the social environment. Another simple example of the backwardness that reflects the reality of this profound crisis in most of the Arab and Islamic countries is the political language used between ruling regimes and their opponents. It is the language of armed clashes and violence, not the language of dialogue and discussion that one hears among advanced, stable peoples.

Islamic societies live in a state of social anxiety. This is reflected in one way or another in the political opposition movements, including the Islamic movements. Although these movements represent the vanguard, they exist in a backward social atmosphere, which affects them. They did not arise from a vacuum. Nor did the ruling political leaders. The latter are authoritarian and autocratic, and they have created an extreme imbalance in the society-government equation by eliminating society's role. Thought and the revitalization of thought result from social movement. If society moves in a vacuum, thought becomes inertial and oscillates. Thinking is a responsibility of society. Ideas do not grow and mature without cross-pollination and interaction among different ideas. Thinking will not be renewed without a vigilant intellect and a society that is continuously on the move. The individual is the core of society. An individual's disequilibrium or success will be reflected in his society. As the British philosopher Toynbee opines, "The individual is the source of social action. Society is merely the relationship among individuals."[12] Therefore, the first effects of an imbalance or success can be felt in the thought process and the nature thereof. The backwardness or progressiveness of the individual's thinking affects his external situation, i.e., his environment or the micro milieu in which he lives. The micro environment or social network is a small unit that is part of the fabric of the greater society. Cohesion and interaction[13] among social units creates the movement needed in society to respond to reality's requirements and changes. Cohesion and interaction create the necessary catalysts to perceive the urgent need for thought. Engagement and renewal represent a strong force among the units of the social fabric and a dynamic factor in society's movement and progress. A paucity of intellectual activity or the drying up of thought weakens the bond between social units and the cohesion of the fabric of society as a whole. This causes the individual in society to be contentious and to debase other's ideas. Individuals view history as a stagnant pond. However, the reality is that history is like a running river. Change and activity are continuous. The UN reports on human development written by Arab specialists for 2002 and 2003, supported by figures and statistics, point to a knowledge and thought deficit in the Arab world.

We frequently hear calls for the revitalization of Islamic discourse. The basic question is how can religious discourse be renewed if there is no abundance of new and dynamic ideas produced by such discourse? The renewal of thought entails revitalizing religious discourse and giving content and dynamism to texts. Perhaps the most important thing is to provide the necessary frameworks for texts, so that they become active rather than rigid or authoritative texts that derive their legitimacy from a tradition of political and social despotism. The most important thing in the renewal of Islamic discourse is to base this discourse not only on theoretical concepts and ideas, but also on practical mechanisms and realistic criteria that are in turned based on reality's many variables. The transformation of thought from the theoretical to the practical renders tangible what one reads. It substantiates experience and fleshes out theory with applied details. This process furthers understanding itself. Knowledge or rational understanding comes into play by fostering an in-depth comprehension of the variables of reality, removed from cultural justification, which is influenced by social customs. Without an in-depth, knowledge-based understanding, it is difficult to isolate a mechanical process for interpreting or rereading religious texts. Oscillating—i.e., thinking and then reproducing the thinking using the same methods and tools without reading or interpreting the texts based on new concepts—further complicates the issue of identity. Juristic reasoning by analogy [qiyas] is still considered the source of legislation [in Islamic law]. It has influenced the correct interpretation of Islamic texts in the dimensions of time and place and it formed the beginning of culture in many areas of the Islamic world. It ultimately led Muslims to judge things by comparing them to what preceded them or to draw conclusions regarding current problems from analogies with old texts. This is the cultural state of the Muslim mentality. It has continued as such for centuries, ultimately leading to the emergence of extremist, active groups that are judgmental [mutawaqqa'ah 'ala dhatiha] and intolerant.

b. Crisis of Identity[14]

The social environment may explain the identity problem somewhat, albeit superficially. On a deeper level, one must examine the problem of identity in Islamic society in its more general, more comprehensive context. The issue of individual identity and to a certain extent national identity in the Islamic world is undergoing a crisis. This crisis stems from the internal conflict between the past and the present. It may also stem from the currently expanding gap between the Muslim's view of himself and the strained reality of the Islamic world, or from the tension created by the mutual attraction between internal and external forces.

Human identity forms as a result of the interaction between the mind and behavior. In other words, the ideas within the mind express themselves in certain behavior. Attempts to change reality give rise to challenges as the mind seeks to constantly adapt its responses to problems and ongoing changes. Identity thus tends to be based on fixed (passive) and variable (active) factors. The fixed elements in a Muslim's identity include the fact that he or she is a Muslim, whether now or 50 years ago. The name Ahmad, for example, is a common name in today's Islamic world, just as it has been for thousands of

years. It is one of the many names by which the Prophet Muhammad was known more than 14 centuries ago. The Muslim who is obedient to his Lord prays five times a day. Muslims have done so for more than a thousand years without any change.

Variable elements represent change in the Islamic environment, or in the circumstances surrounding the nation or facing Muslims in their daily lives in terms of clothing, food, technology, geography, information, data, numbers, and the like. If ideas in the Muslim's mind are rigid or inflexible, his behavior will also be rigid and inflexible. If the reality is stagnant and unchanging, the mind will not change. In such a situation, interaction between the mind and the surrounding reality, which generates ideas, is lacking. This leads to the genesis of an identity and personality that sees things only in black and white or unidimensionally. It implies the predominance of fixed or passive elements in the personality, which leaves no room for change or interaction with the changing reality.

The crisis of identity points to a crisis of the mind and a crisis of reality. Both crises are leading to a crisis of interaction that manifests in a confusing mix of a rational, logical outlook and emotional judgments. The result is the absence of rational thought that can reconcile considerations of time and place.

The Muslims' view of themselves tends toward an idealized conceptualization of identity believed to be complete and perfect, not something that has yet to be fully formed. In other words, Muslims live in an imaginary world or a world of "what should be," not "what is." The Muslims have yet to form a complete national identity. This is a process of formation in which society is undergoing an extremely slow transformation. Elsewhere, components making up the national identity are diminishing under the effect of communications, the media, and other leveling influences and forces.

Belief in an ideal, "immutable" identity is supported by rigid and inflexible ideas that have evolved over history. Such ideas selectively favor old, worn-out, obsolete tools that exalt the value of the "pure identity." Belief in a complete, pure identity or, as we constantly say, "purity of identity," confers a sort of sanctity, credibility, and authenticity to any symbol from the past. What we have then is a mixture of reality, the sacred, the imagined, and an irresistible longing for the past. Without normal channels for expressing ideas and without tools for practicing democracy, the definition of "us" and "them" will be based on a political and doctrinal foundation. The violent campaigns launched by the governments in the Islamic world against extremist groups, the situation of social stagnation, the crisis of identity in society as a whole, and the underground actions taken by extremist groups—all of these factors allow the ideas of these groups to gain some public acceptance.

However, these ideas inevitably collide with "the majority opinion" when an extremist group externalizes them by attempting to impose its view of reality in order to assert its authority over Muslims and non-Muslims. In other words, external pressure exerted by foreign powers and by Western globalization on the internal components of the Muslim personality, which are passive components unable to absorb and reproduce ideas, will lead to greater intellectual or cognitive reactionarism among Muslims, which will in turn

lead to greater isolation and violent reactions against foreign powers or more pressure to preserve the status quo. Or, these extremist groups will attempt to prove themselves and gain recognition by undertaking adventures or even committing suicide to save face. This will turn them more inward cognitively and make them cling more to their own reality.

The problems facing Islamic societies as a result of this crisis of identity are significant. However, these societies have great opportunities to overcome this crisis. Arab and Muslim intellectuals must form a clear vision of the concept of identity. This requires discussion and study of any issue to define the tools and modalities for formulating ideas on identity. There is an urgent need for dynamic, creative ideas to implant the [appropriate] culture among common Muslims.

There is a need for objective self-criticism of the Muslims' current reality and a reading of the historical and social dimensions from an Islamic perspective to deal with the striking contradictions in today's Islamic world.

The backwardness of the social environment, the crisis of thought and identity, and the political despotism of the ruling authorities are reflected clearly in the problem of violence. Extremist groups, or groups that believe in the superiority of a specific creed or race such as extremist groups belonging to minorities, will never accept the systematic logic of the language of dialogue and discussion that is present in democratic societies. The only language of such groups is the language of destruction, rejection of others, and an undeterrable desire to monopolize authority. Such groups would impose a fait accompli, thereby precluding any opportunity to accept anything different, new, or previously unknown. As far as they are concerned, all decisions have already been made, and all problems have been resolved in the framework of an inflexible, behavioral philosophy of thought. There is no room for a middle ground. The extremists see change as difficult, especially cultural change and the acquisition of new ideas. This leads to a violent reaction, which is one possible behavioral response to environmental changes. The intensity of this violence increases as a function of the speed of changes in society. Violence weakens the strength and importance of dialogue and the development of the art of dialogue among Islamic groups as a whole. You see them, in their political weakness, conducting a dialogue in a vacuum and failing to appreciate the West as a certain, integrated system. Hasan al-Turabi, for example, called for dialogue when he visited London in the late 1980s. However, he has problems with holding a dialogue with the Christians in southern Sudan. Iran proposes a dialogue of civilizations, but it is bereft of an Iranian-Iranian dialogue.

There is neither security nor stability in Iraq today, because there is no political stability. Political stability will not occur unless there is a Kurdish-Sunni-Shi'i dialogue. In time, dialogue teaches the art of seeking areas of agreement and being flexibility regarding areas of disagreement. Most Muslim rulers are not interested in dialogue. They enjoy complete power over their peoples. The only outlets open to oppositionists are places of worship or underground activity.

The youth of Muslim societies have no opportunity to express themselves because of the domination [of the ruling parties] in the absence of other political forces or active Islamic associations that can absorb the energies of the youth, whose only path is that of extremism or indifference.

c. Education

Education in Islamic countries suffers from an obvious, major crisis. Classical educational methods and sterile curricula are still prevalent in most schools and universities, including religious ones.

The basis for this backwardness and inability to keep pace with global developments is the backwardness of educational curricula in terms of methods, content, and style. There is also a clear lack of educational equipment, up-to-date books, and computers. University education is clearly incapable of creating the minds needed for various activities in society relating to opinion shaping and decision making. Students are not equipped with teamwork skills, presentation skills, and critical thinking skills. Effective community cadres with a deep appreciation of their society, life, and the world are not being prepared. The focus must be on preparing not only leaders, but cadres and activists who can form effective social forces for change. There is no decentralized administration of educational institutions. Nor is there any flexibility in formulating reforms, meeting the needs of the labor market, and filling the needs engendered by social changes stemming from globalization, etc. There is a need for:[15] databases; systems for investing in human resources; systems for managing modern laboratories and educational information; mechanisms for evaluation and review, integration of knowledge and experience, and the exchange of views between Muslims at home and abroad. All of this is needed in this stage, in which we are attempting to develop Islamic local and international values to create new dimensions and new approaches to our work and activity and to meet new requirements and cultivate sustainable development in our work and activity.

The absence of such advanced education is reflected in the deterioration of religious education and the failure to engender the profound awareness needed to bring about social change and conduct the necessary review of tenets, thinking, and basic viewpoints. The most important thing is perhaps the total neglect of sociology and its role in understanding social action.

d. Nature of Educational Institutions in the Age of Knowledge[16]

Technological complexity, developments in the information and knowledge revolution, and the effects of demographic changes in the world, particularly during 1975-2000 have left clear marks on all educational institutions, including elementary and secondary schools and universities. The have also led to an increase in the number of open universities, private universities, industrial colleges, and distance learning programs.

Schools and universities have shifted from fixed strategies with clear goals for comprehensive education or from providing an education in general fundamentals to dynamic, sophisticated, time-bound strategies aimed at industrialized, specialized education that produces products. These products are suited to the market and change with time to meet ongoing, diverse needs. Current education is based on the development of skills and expertise to meet the needs of markets and companies to deal with the problems of advanced technologies that now permeate the minutiae of contemporary human society.

Rapid developments in advanced, easy-to-use technologies have eliminated the immediate need for exertion and thinking. They require specialists with defined skills that enable them to deal with problems when they occur. Modern educational methods focus on critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving. However, in practice, the fact that things are readymade and processed and come with complete instructions means that there is little need for thinking, analysis, or speed in these processes. Thinking and analysis can be performed through qualitatively and quantitatively in-depth scientific models and technological molds according to programmed rules and steps based on which the human mind operates in many cases when it deals with the problems of modern technologies or a breakdown in a sophisticated device essential to run the mechanisms of a modern society. Generally, because of the complexity of this technology and the society that controls it, specialists have a pressing need for other specialists to handle some problems or glitches.

Another issue is that the image in the age of multimedia has become just as important, if not more important, than the word. In other words, looking at something means that there is little need for the visualizing, conceptualizing, reflecting, or thinking that accompanies the reading process. These developments in the advanced and industrialized world (e.g., the spread and increase in the popularity of multimedia courses in all specialties from engineering to the arts, social sciences, etc.) are reflected in one way or another in schools and universities. Schools and universities must take in account these major changes. These important developments do not negate certain constants in education, such as axioms, fundamentals, theories, and the use of readymade molds for thinking, which, as we mentioned, are the core of the advanced technology underpinning contemporary human society. On the other hand, it is also necessary to leave behind these molds and systems in order to penetrate deeply into content with objectivity governed by the mind, not emotions. Frequently, actions and judgments reflect ideas that are based on impassioned emotions, especially in the Arab and Islamic world.

This requires instructing and training students to boldly question axioms and fundamentals through useful dialogue based on the exchange of ideas and the interweaving of experiences, not a debate of the deaf. This is possible through teamwork or examination of the same problem by two or more teams with the creation of the necessary competition. Such exercises should be characterized by extreme objectivity (e.g., through the presence of a professor or assistant professor or the use of other objective guides). The goal here is to demonstrate the pros and cons when formulating opinions and ideas for solutions and appropriate models for different problems. This will

lead to the putting forth of new explanations. It will produce new tools and catalyze thinking out of the box, leading to new ways of thinking.

Therefore, Arab and Islamic schools and universities must focus not only on statistics, the average number of graduates, the production of useful manpower for the machinery of production and consumption, the linking of education and finance, etc. (which are very important), but also on ethical educational values and concepts, which are the heart of our heritage and civilization. Our Arab and Islamic society is currently sick. Because of this sickness, our educational systems are sick. Our society is based on maladies common to the Arab and Islamic countries, such as patronage, nepotism, fraud, deceit, hypocrisy, meddling, fanaticism, extremism, killing others in the name of religion, and suicide in the name of martyrdom among other maladies that form a long list.

There is an urgent need for a healthy educational system that produces citizens and leaders for society—leaders who can help build a modern society that is based on morals and commendable education and that provides a model for the world. The focus should be on thinking, not just industrial and productive thinking as mentioned above, but also on critical thinking that goes more in depth than the programmed molds and regulated frameworks. It is also generally necessary to entrench the primary foundations of the new thinking process so that it plays an important role in the life of the contemporary individual. Finally, we must provide the necessary frameworks and nuance for the new model that we wish to put forth to the world.

4. The American Side of the Relationship

The United States does not yet completely believe in dialogue with moderate Islamists. Occasionally, an academic dialogue is held to become familiar with views or to exchange views. The goal of such academic dialogue is to show that America is not opposed to Islam or to deflect concern with the need for a real dialogue. America attempts to obtain as much as possible, but it is unable to give anything in return. Such a policy may have positive results in the short term. However, it may be disastrous in the long term, as we shall shortly see. No decision has been made to hold a true dialogue between America and the Islamists. This objective has not crystallized politically. The reason is a difference of opinion among Western Middle East specialists on the nature of the trends of political Islam. It is not easy to "accept Islam"[17] and the great challenge posed by the Muslim reality. There is a major contradiction in America and the West. From many, we hear that "Islam is not the problem" and "Islam is compatible with democracy."[18,19] On the other hand, there is no true dialogue or cooperation between Islamists and American initiatives. The tragedy of September 11, 2001, while enormous, has not catalyzed any constructive, organized dialogue with moderate Islamists. It seems that Washington refuses to acknowledge the lesson that should have been learned from the events of September 11.

We frequently hear Western analysts talking about the difficulty of identifying Islamists with whom a dialogue can be held. The question is: How long will it take to find an "acceptable" Muslim suited for a dialogue with America? America attempts through this

strategy to avoid the risks or unknown consequences of dealing politically with the Islamists. Extremist Islam of a violent character is currently at its apogee or starting to decline. However, America, with its short-term policies, has prolonged the life of the extremists and the peak of the violence. It has also poisoned relations and caused serious, irreparable, long-term damage. Hatred of America had been limited to a few countries in the Middle East. It has now expanded to cover the entire Islamic world and is expected to extend to the developing world.

U.S. initiatives on civil society are intended to support NGOs of a Western character, not specific domestic Islamic groups that revolve around mosques and religious and professional institutions. We see a double standard in the policies of America and Western Europe regarding the defense of human rights and freedom. Secular prisoners alone are defended. Rarely do we see support for the defense of moderate Islamist prisoners—support that could give credibility to Washington's policies in this regard. This approach dovetails with the wishes of most Arab and Muslim rulers, These rulers want the West to be frightened by the danger posed by the Islamic groups and the like. However, many of these rulers are clearly opportunistic in seizing every opportunity to garner support for their regions by exploiting the wave of hatred toward America among their peoples. The Arab and Islamic governments persecute both extremist Islamists and Islamists who believe in democracy, human rights, etc. This makes it extremely difficult for the democratic Islamists to build a popular base of support. The governments of the United States and Western Europe are aware of this dynamic. Washington's awareness of the hypocrisy of such Arab and Muslim rulers has no practical effect on the ground. Some statistics indicate that the majority in nine Islamic countries believe in the success of democracy in their countries.[20] Other statistics show that the Islamist parties enjoy popularity ranging from 35 percent to 40 percent.[21]

Many intellectual and activist Muslims and some Westerners believe that the model of democracy in the Islamic world should be particular to the Islamic world and stem from the ideas, customs, and desires of the people of the Islamic world. In other words, the spread of democracy should take into account the historical and cultural sensitivities of Muslims. Disregard of the historical and cultural traditions of the region may help create a strong force that rejects democracy, yielding results diametrically opposed to the intended results.

U.S. President Bush states that democracy is not only possible but essential in the Middle East and the Islamic world in general.[22] The truth of the matter is that major changes have not been seen on the ground. This increases the reservations of Islamic intellectuals given the recent history of U.S. policy on democracy, which has been of a theoretical, impractical nature regarding the Middle East region.

Washington's policies toward the Arab governments are characterized by a double standard. Washington is aware, as stated above, of the Arab governments' strategy of causing the United States to fear any Islamist while exploiting hatred for America among the peoples whom they govern to garner support their illegitimate regimes. This duplicitous dealing with the Islamic countries deprives U.S. policy of its credibility.

Political pressure is clearly being exerted on Tunisian President Zine El Abidine. However, the same pressure is not being applied to Saudi Arabia to introduce democratic reforms.[23] U.S. policy and the U.S. media have much to say on the need to change educational curricula in Saudi Arabia but little to say on the need for political reforms in Saudi Arabia.[24] We hear no talk from Washington of civil society reforms or the shameful lack of rights for women in Saudi Arabia, whereas Washington has shaken up the world regarding the cause of women in Afghanistan.

The military ruler of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, is extremely important to the U.S. strategy in the war against terrorism, although a clear definition of the mechanisms of democratic action is lacking in Pakistan. A key friend of Washington in the region, who has Washington's ear, the King of Bahrain, has begun to retreat from some of his democratic reforms.

Bush talks about democracy in Iraq being a model for the region. However, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and many other leaders in the American administration speak of limited democracy and would not permit democracy with an Islamic majority.[25]

U.S. policy continues to support some regimes allied with Washington that are dictatorial toward their peoples and attempt to derive legitimacy for their dictatorships from the international milieu. These regimes use the war against terrorism to justify their attacks against anything democratic, even Islamists who believe in democracy. And they do so with little reaction from Washington. U.S. policy thus heightens the wariness, suspicion, and doubt of most of the moderate Islamist groups toward Washington. It strengthens the current barrier of mistrust between the two sides, which stems in particular from Directive 97 issued by the National Security Agency.[1] This directive focuses on stability and peace and does not give precedence to democracy. America claims that it is now acting to spread democracy in the Middle East, which, it claims, will take some time among the Islamic groups or peoples because of the social laws. It cannot be implemented in a short time or put into effect like laws with solid articles. To strengthen this call, America needs more credibility in its policy with the [Arab and Islamic] peoples. It needs to form a foreign policy toward Muslims that is characterized by greater integration among the different agencies in Washington. This is extremely difficult given that relevant policies and decisions are made in different agencies, such as the Department of State, Department of Defense, national security, Congress, the CIA, etc. The White House is unable to implement a major, intermeshed, homogenous strategy in its foreign policy.[26] The experience and complications of Iraq may spur decision makers in Washington adopt a new strategy that takes into account the lessons of the past. Or, decision makers could return to the same previous mode, namely a focus on stability and peace without encouraging the spread of democracy. Such a course could stem from a conviction that the current strategy is not succeeding and that reforms are too difficult due to the magnitude and diversity of the problems. According to this

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[1] [The author is apparently referring to "National Security Decision Directive 99 - United States Security Strategy for the Near East & South Asia, July 12, 1983," a heavily redacted version of which is available at http://www.gulfinvestigations.net/IMG/pdf/iraq21.pdf]

understanding, the best way to stop and contain the decline in the region would be to attempt to isolate the region from the world and have it governed by authoritarian governments, with very little freedom for citizens. This would mean a defeat for Washington's reform efforts and produce results that would be more disastrous in the long term.

The decline cannot be stopped if there is no clear policy that breaks completely with the past. Problems cannot be contained to the Middle East in this day of the global village, as clearly underscored by the events of September 11, Bali, etc. How can the Middle East be contained when it is a key, influential part of the Islamic world?

The policy of stability and peace in the Middle East has with time harshened the severity of the dictatorships, the intensity of their domination, and the magnitude of the contradiction, which has ultimately led to shocks in the region. We are only now seeing the beginnings of these shocks.

A mistake on the road to applying democracy does not mean a mistake in essence of the idea of democracy. The selection of the most difficult path (because of the region's problems and complexities) does not necessarily mean that the most beneficial policies cannot be applied. The deferral of reform to the future could threaten a true eruption that affects global security in an unprecedented way.

The application of democracy or democratic models and rule by the majority in the Islamic countries does not necessarily mean the infiltration of hostile forces or forces influenced by Washington. Nor does it mean blind borrowing from the West. The Islamic democratic model will be underpinned by openness, pluralism, ideas, etc. With time, the forces that believe in democracy will grow, bringing about the necessary social transformations. This will increase rationality. Rationality will in turn facilitate the transfer of new innovations and inventions arising from American advances in many fields.

Strategic Viewpoint

The United States enjoys historically unprecedented global power, especially in the military and knowledge fields. It must examine strategic matters with clarity and precision. It can use its power to entrench its domination as we clearly see today. Or it can use its power to lead the world. The main question is, does Washington view or understand the use of force as an end in itself, or does it actually have a basic objective in using its tremendous power?

The use of force for the sake of force or domination produces hatred and envy, creates new areas of international tension, and poses an ongoing threat to world security. The nature of domination throughout history, as indicated by the experience of European colonialism, generates many enemies, which increases foci of tension. Moreover, such enemies could form alliances that pose a real threat to U.S. and global security.

As an alternative, Washington could exercise leadership based on the power available to it while seeking to understand the social and political manifestations of global tension and cooperating with others in a broad campaign to understand and ease global tensions.

The sharing of responsibilities [by Washington] with other parties requires capabilities and efforts. At the same time, it deepens [U.S.] influence on those parties. Leadership is exercised through consultation and benefits, not dictates and orders. Such a course would enable Washington to be proud of its fairness and morality.

The Islamic world is one of the most roiled regions in the world. Dialogue and the seeking of good relations with "acceptable" Islamic groups will allow a synthesized, mutual understanding to evolve and lessen the heightened state of agitation.

5. Case Studies

a. The International Forum for Islamic Dialogue (IFID). The IFID publishes the periodical *Islam 21,* a sophisticated network of enlightened, Islamic writers. This publication presents new authors and encourages them to treat the pressing issues and serious challenges of contemporary Islam.

It is extremely important to have a forum where Islamists can exchange ideas and interweave their experiences to create areas of cooperation and joint action and to develop a new mindset across the broad expanse of writers, intellectuals, and thinkers to ultimately create the desired current.

Since its inception, the IFID has aspired to maintain dialogue and discussion. Its goal is to develop and raise Islamic, humanitarian, and democratic thought to the level required by the 21st century's challenges. Of no less importance, it also seeks to deepen dialogue and discussion among Muslims and to make them appreciate tolerance for other Muslims. If Islamists are capable of achieving these ends among themselves, they are capable of holding a dialogue with non-Muslims. In this way, Muslims will develop their view of themselves, their society, and the world around him.

The forum publishes a periodical, *Islam21.* This publication boldly presents new ideas to break the stagnation of the Islamic situation. The forum advocates new thinking to develop the intellectual side.

The forum has held workshops and conferences on Islamic thought, democracy, and civil society in London, Cairo, Morocco, and elsewhere. Recently, it held workshops on Islamic law and democracy in Sudan and Nigeria in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington.

The forum maintains and continually updates its Internet site, www.Islam21.net, which contains many releases and activities of the organization. In the past two years, 662,603 visited the site. In the past three months, more than 13,459 persons visited the organization's site each week.

The forum is developing a new, instructional, scientific guide to deepen the awareness of Islamic cadres and train them in modern, scientific methods.

The forum has begun to make the necessary arrangements to train Islamic cadres in workshops in London, Egypt, Morocco, and Iraq.

Since the fall of Saddam Husayn's regime, the forum's contacts with Iraq have increased. The forum established an office in Basra and will establish another office in Baghdad when the security situation stabilizes. The forum is also seeking to cooperate with NGOs in Iraq.

The forum gives primary attention to youth, the development of dialogue and advanced thinking, and the boosting of young people's awareness of Islamic affairs, society, and the world. The forum has commenced publication of the periodical *Islam 21 – Youth* for persons between the ages of 16 and 28. We hope that this project will be developed and deepened in the future.

The forum was one of the primary elements in arranging and organizing "brainstorming" meetings, which are conducted monthly in London by a group of Islamist intellectuals such as Iqbal Asaria, Diya'-al-Din Sirdar, Abd-al-Wahhab Effendi and others. It has invited prominent speakers to give brief talks followed by discussions and enrichment of the topic of the talk with the ideas and experiences of audience participants. Such speakers have included Abd-al-Karim Sarush, Tariq Ramadan, Hasan Hanafi, Ali Asghar Engineer, and others.

The forum is planning with the Center for Islamic Studies in Damascus to hold roundtables on Islamic intellectual renewal in Damascus, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the coming year.

b. Brief Experiences in Iraq

During my contacts and visits to Iraq, I noted that the political Islam groups that believe in democracy have a weak relationship with America and little political support.

It seems that Washington is hesitant to support enlightened Islamic forces that believe in democracy. For example, the Islamic democratic current[27] (numbering more than 40,000, with offices in Baghdad and areas in the south) attempted to establish a political dialogue with the Americans without achieving any practical results.

The Americans are apparently dealing with and supporting the less democratic forces, perhaps based on their belief that the latter are more capable of controlling the people and managing the situation. Perhaps this preference is due to the history and popularity of these forces, although a survey by the CPA claims that the Islamic democratic current enjoys a popularity rate of 48 percent. Civil society NGOs are constantly increasing. This requires the establishment of a "Commission on Civil Society Organizations" to

regulate and register these organizations. Despite the increase in such organizations, they do not represent a true force, and their roots do not appear to be strong in society. This is perhaps due to the immaturity of Iraq's independent civil society sector, which stems from the following:

- People's lack of awareness of civil society affairs.

- A lack of financial and administrative resources or independence.

- A lack of legal independence.

These organizations are still subject to the Associations Law, which was issued previously by Saddam's regime. This law, which continues to remain in effect, restricts the margin of independence of associations and subordinates them to the government. There are more than 70 American organizations in Iraq training the staff of civil society organizations and other organizations in management and leadership. Nonetheless, the efforts of the American organizations are inadequate. They are unable to render these civil society organizations into a force that can be activated in the next few years to bring about democratic transformations.

It also seems that Iraqi government authorities, ministries, and officials do not understand the depth of the work of civil society organizations. Even though civil society organizations are not government entities, some officials continue to issue orders to these organizations. The governor of Wasit (Al-Kut), for example, issued a decision to the Association of Iraqi Disabled Persons to underscore the need for the association to comply with the governor's decree. The matter has reached the point where a new ministry called the Ministry of Human Rights has been created. This ministry receives government support. It would have been more worthwhile for this ministry to have been an organization or association that is not subordinate to the government or any authority. Such an organization could monitor and oversee the government's practices and laws relating to human rights.

6. Summary

The relationship between America and the Muslims deteriorated after the events of September 11 to their lowest point in 50 years. This deterioration stems from objective factors. There is no deep-rooted or prior enmity between the two sides. The social apostasy and immaturity of societies in the Islamic world and the Islamic world's failure to revitalize its ideas and social, economic, cultural, and political systems further complicates the problems in this relationship. The tragedy of the Muslims is that they are backward but refuse to acknowledge their backwardness. This increases the magnitude of suffering and causes further confusion in the relationship between the two sides.

Educational curricula and methods are undergoing a true crisis. This crisis affects religious education and makes both secular and religious education incapable of producing leaders, cadres, and social segments who can participate in social change and

produce the necessary shakeup for such change. Religious revitalization is still slow. A mechanical process has not crystallized to produce the required qualitative leap in thinking to galvanize society to form new social forces with new ideas that can generate change.

Backwardness in high-tech tools such as the Internet and communications is delaying the development of political transparency and democratization. Such tools can help society mature through rapid horizontal communications. They can also facilitate initiative, creativity, and productivity. The deterioration of the social, educational, and technological side in Muslim society is reflected primarily in the popular Islamist groups, which represent the vanguard of the nation.

The basic causes of the democratic deficiency are traditional social forces and autocratic governments. The initial battle for independence from colonialism has ended. The battle for independence from dictatorships and autocracy is still going on.

Regarding the other side, America, although Washington has formulated policy priorities to ensure the spread of democracy in the Middle East and the Islamic world, there is still doubt and distrust regarding America's intentions in the region. The practical reality, as viewed by the Islamic groups, is that the talk of democracy in the corridors of Washington is theoretical and has not made its way into actual practice. The image of the United States is linked with persecution and coercion in the region and Washington's relationships with autocratic governments.

Muslims believe that reform must be undertaken based on the dynamics of Islamic society. External pressure, even if it is not in the form of a war, will produce the opposite than intended results. Washington is primarily interested in a double-standard policy in the Islamic world. Washington does not engage in any true political dialogue with local forces that believe in democracy. Because of the logic of the strong versus the weak, there is a consensus only on the need to hold an academic dialogue. Washington determines the content and form of this dialogue. The basic conclusion is that there is a fundamental contradiction in the relationship between Washington and the regional governments. A third party, which comprises moderate Islamic groups and advocates of democracy, is unable to exploit U.S. pressure to bring about reform. Nor can it play on the aforesaid contradiction to consolidate its distinctive line. This creates a real crisis or hesitation to ease the severity of the contradiction in the relationship or to influence Washington's relationship with authoritative governments in the region. These governments prevent the evolution of internal dynamism, including in the moderate Islamist groups. This causes the region to regress or to constantly deteriorate.