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“Islamic Responses to Modernity:
Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack”

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In his influential work, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, political scientist characterized modernity in the following way:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern experiences and environments cut across all boundaries...in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.¹

Indeed, although the full consequences of modernity were (and are) difficult enough to comprehend and process in Western societies, their effect was especially devastating in non-Western ones, where the modern clashed with the traditional in ways that often produced cataclysmic consequences. In Islamic societies, especially those of the Middle East, the changes of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were particularly disquieting, as the processes of urbanization, industrialization and legislative reforms collided with Islamic norms in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician, the founder of Islamic Jihad, who is widely believed to be Osama Bin Laden’s second-in-command in Al-Qaeda is the product of the dislocations of modernity in the Egyptian context; thus, his turn to Islamic militancy can easily be viewed as a desire for a return to a premodern past. However, I will argue in this essay that al-Zawahiri’s responses to modernity as presented in his writings are profoundly modern in terms of their attitudes to subjectivity, fragmentation, and political legitimacy. In an interesting contrast, the writings of Farid Esack, a South African Muslim prominent in the antiapartheid movement, manifest different responses to modernity, but also ones that are thoroughly modern. In fact, although al-Zawahiri is an Islamist and Esack a reformist Muslim, the two exhibit a similar awareness of modernity and its attendant problems, but differ, however, in their fundamental responses to the modern, their framing of the problems associated with modernity, and their proposed solutions.

Modernity

Two of the earliest articulators of the meaning and implications of the modern condition are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, whose writings “celebrated the destruction of what they deemed to be the prejudices and superstitions of the premodern era” while at the same time recognizing the disorienting instability of life created by these processes. Their tract, “The Communist Manifesto,” clearly articulates these paradoxical feelings, stating:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.²

In this and other works, Marx combines a sobering realization of the contemporary terrible state of working-class conditions with the excitement of creating a new kind of human history that would not be based on “ancient prejudices and opinions” but on a scientific understanding of human progress and a realization of human potential for real egalitarianism and social justice. For Marx, “because humans owe their existence to themselves alone, through their labor, they are, or rather should be, masters of themselves and their conditions—a position of subjectivity.”³

A different conception of subjectivity was put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche, who writes in his 1887 work, *The Genealogy of Morals*, that “the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom...in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the right to make promises.”⁴ For Nietzsche, the individual and his or her “will to power” expressed the highest stage of human evolution: “all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation, through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.”⁵ Thus like Marx, Nietzsche expresses the subjectivity of (some) humans and their capacity to take charge of their lives. However, unlike Marx, Nietzsche rejects the Enlightenment idea that science and reason could be the basis for modernity and progress, arguing that only a Dionysian surrender to art and ecstatic experience could lead to full liberation.⁶ In his book, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, al-Zawahiri put forth a similar view of liberation through surrender, not to art, however, but to Islam.

Less optimistic views than those of Marx and Nietzsche on human potential for subjectivity were articulated by other twentieth-century thinkers, including sociologist Max Weber and political philosopher Carl Schmitt. In his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber characterizes “the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” as an “iron cage,” in which “material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history.” This tightly bureaucratized order “determine[s] the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism...with irresistible force” and produces “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.”⁷ For Weber, the new religion of capitalistic materialism was incapable of producing subjectivity, since modern humans have no choice but to be ruled by the bureaucratic order

within which humanity exists. Weber's vision is that of "a rootless world without any meaning" and modernity "is an endless search for meaning by its very nature."⁸

In his 1932 essay, *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt concurs with Weber's characterization of modernity and extends that definition to the political arena. Most importantly, Schmitt denies the possibility for a political subjectivity of the individual, writing that "in one way or another [the definition of] 'political' is generally juxtaposed to 'state' or at least is brought into relation with it..."; further, in a modern state, "everything is at least potentially political, and in referring to the state it is no longer possible to assert for it a specifically political nature."⁹ For Schmitt, political power, especially regulation of violence, resides in the institutions of the modern state described by Weber, whose invisible centralized power envelops all of human existence and impedes all potential for subjectivity. In fact, "in the wake of the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, Stalinism, and other episodes of twentieth-century history, we can see that totalitarian possibilities are contained within the institutional parameters of modernity, rather than being foreclosed by them."¹⁰

A similar sense of suffocation and entrapment is expressed by philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which contains a scathing critique of the dual nature of modernity—simultaneously characterized by freedom and stultification. Although "the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty," "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."¹¹ The authors go on to question how it can be that human beings have achieved so much in technology, medicine, science, etc., yet social injustices, war, genocide, as well as a deadening consumer culture, still continue to exist. In answer, they propose a hypothesis: "Reason has become irrational."¹² What Horkheimer and Adorno contend is that the rationality of the Enlightenment has become a myth in its own right, exactly like the myths it purports to supplant. Thus, "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."¹³ According to Horkheimer and Adorno, modern capitalist society is engaged in a pattern of domination: the domination of nature by human beings, domination of nature within human beings, and, the domination of some human beings by others.¹⁴ This system of domination is driven by fear of the human and nonhuman unknown—the Other: "Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical."¹⁵ In this new "fearless" world, everything, including culture, has become fetishized as a commodity—hence:

culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system."¹⁶

Instead of providing an avenue for independence of thought (and, consequently, dissent from the dominant system), culture now perpetuates the system by providing it with a language of domination and propaganda tools for disseminating that language. Consequently, for Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment is inherently totalitarian because as it perpetuates the myth of its own complete rationality, it loses its own reflexiveness.¹⁷ Interestingly, both Esack and al-Zawahiri make a similar critique of modernity, although they provide very different solutions to the problems identified within it.

In addition to subjectivity, another important characteristic of the modern is its fragmented nature and instability. In his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, geographer David Harvey writes that “most ‘modern’ writers have recognized that the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity, its penchant even, for ‘totalizing chaos.’” This instability reveals itself in modernity’s problematic relationship with the past, since “the transitoriness of things makes it difficult to preserve any sense of historical continuity.”¹⁸ Like Marx and Nietzsche writing a century earlier, Harvey believes that the present can only be created by destroying the past and then creating a present that utilizes elements of the past to construct a better reality in the contemporary world. Thus, “the image of ‘creative destruction’ is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the particular dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project.”¹⁹ This destruction of a holistic universe in the modern era shatters the conception of human beings and societies as total entities, instead inaugurating an era “characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself.”²⁰ According to Harvey, living through such a time of insecurity and fragmentation induces a “desire for stable values” and “leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions—the family, religion, the state.”²¹ Such a response to the fragmentation of modernity can certainly be seen in the writings of al-Zawahiri.

However, another response is possible to the dissonance of the modern. In his work, *Modernity at Large*, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that fragmentation can be liberating, since awareness of potential social, economic and political identities is so much larger in the modern era than ever before, people can construct their various selves with full awareness of their roles in society and with an eye to their particular needs. In Appadurai’s view, “the complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics.” He proposes a framework for analyzing these disjunctures that characterizes them as *-scapes*, that is, as “perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.” The *-scapes* included by Appadurai in his model are ethnoscaples, mediascaples; technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples. It is at the intersection point of these five shifting landscapes that a person or a society can locate itself “authentically” and find a way to evolve.²² Farid Esack is a strong advocate of this paradigm of shifting, overlapping identityscapes, writing that “there is precious little—if anything at all—which is entirely spiritual, entirely personal, entirely social or entirely whatever.”²³ Thus, the differences between al-Zawahiri and Esack regarding the creation of Islamic identity can be analyzed in terms of the attitudes toward social fragmentation articulated by Harvey and Appadurai, respectively.

Finally, in his seminal essay, *The Consequences of Modernity*, sociologist Anthony Giddens posits that modernity is inherently multifaceted and primarily characterized by the separation of time and space (time-space distancing); the development of disembedding mechanisms; and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge.²⁴ According to Giddens, humanity is currently living through a period of radicalized “high modernity,” in which the features of modernity listed above are intensified and their effects are felt more strongly all over the world. The concept of disembedding and its polar opposite, reembedding, are particularly relevant to modernity as applied to Islamic societies in the twentieth century. By *disembedding*, Giddens means “the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring

across indefinite spans of time-space.”²⁵ Conversely, *reembedding* is “the reappropriation or recasting of disembedded social relations so as to pin them down (however partially or transitorily) to local conditions of time and place.”²⁶ In their works, Esack and al-Zawahiri proposed significantly different methods for the “reembedding” of social and political relationships of Islamic societies.

In sum, the main features of modernity as defined by some prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers include: (1) subjectivity and political/social agency; (2) fragmentation and disembeddedness of social institutions; and (3) the vesting of power and political legitimacy in the nation-state. The different responses indicated to these aspects of the modern in the writings of Esack and Zawahiri constitute the core of their different approaches to the relationship between Islam and modernity.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity can be defined as “the property characterizing the autonomous, self-willing, self-conscious, and self-defining agent.”²⁷ Clearly, reflexivity and agency of the individual—concepts that were developed in a Western Enlightenment context—are privileged in this definition and are, in fact, central to it. However, in the Islamic context, subjectivity of the individual was in direct competition with the principle of God’s direct sovereignty over the world. To get around this problem, some thinkers, most notably the ideologues of the Iranian revolution of 1979, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Taleghani and Ali Shariati, worked through the concept of “mediated subjectivity,” that is, “human subjectivity projected onto the attributes of monotheistic deity—attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and volition—and then partially reappropriated by humans. In this scheme, human subjectivity is contingent on God’s subjectivity.”²⁸ Such an attitude is implicit in Ayman al-Zawahiri’s book, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, in which Zawahiri affirms that “God willed that those events [persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s under Nasser’s regime] were the spark that ignited the jihad movement in Egypt against the government,” while simultaneously advocating man’s ability to influence the course of his existence. In this worldview, God is the ultimate authority and *jihadists* are “the intermediaries between the Creator and mankind.”²⁹

The subjectivity advocated by Zawahiri is an active, not a contemplative one. It is a subjectivity of awareness followed by action, in which anyone who does not act decisively to defend Islam is not fulfilling his duty to God. Throughout *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner* there is a strong, almost overwhelming emphasis on the importance of Muslims developing a *jihadist* awareness and acting upon it—thus, al-Zawahiri’s assertion that “with the emergence of this new batch of Islamists...a new awareness is increasingly developing among the sons of Islam, who are eager to uphold it; namely, there is no solution without jihad.”³⁰ For similar reasons, al-Zawahiri celebrates the *mujahidin* experience in Afghanistan as instrumental in raising awareness of the value of jihad in battling the external enemy and in forging bonds of loyalty that transcended the Afghan War of the 1980s. He praises the Arab Afghans as a people who have returned to serve God, writing that

they possess a quality that their enemies cannot hope to acquire. They are the people who most eloquently bear witness to their God’s power, Who has given them strength drawn from his own strength, until they have turned from a scattered few who possess little and know little, into a power that is feared and that threatens the stability of the new world order.³¹

This passage clearly shows al-Zawahiri's use of mediated subjectivity—whereas before they were given God's strength, the Arab Afghans were weak and ignorant, but now they have become a power to be reckoned with.

Another locus of al-Zawahiri's subjectivity is his stress on the importance of military strategy and practical military resistance against both domestic and external enemies of Islam. He critiques the failed uprising in Asyut, Egypt after Sadat's 1981 assassination, writing that it "was doomed to fail. It was an 'emotional' uprising that was poorly planned...[it] was based on an unrealistic plan to seize Asyut and then advance northward toward Cairo, disregarding any figures about the enemy's strength."³² In contrast, al-Zawahiri presents the ideas of Isam al-Qamari, a tank commander in the Egyptian army who was part of al-Zawahiri's cell in the Islamic Jihad in 1981.³³ Al-Zawahiri admiringly writes about Qamari's hardheaded, practical plans for achieving the goals of the organization, which included weapons training, active recruitment techniques and other military tactics. Further, al-Zawahiri notes that Qamari criticized the Islamists from a purely practical, not spiritual, standpoint, noting that their members "are not trained and lack combat experience," are too "preoccupied by the police" and had failed "to examine the military situation from an analytical and practical perspective based on data."³⁴ Al-Zawahiri here presents the reader with a contrast between the "emotional," ill-conceived and failed 1981 Asyut uprising and Qamari's rational plans for an Islamist military operation. Clearly he locates subjectivity as a quality of rationality rather than emotion—a very modern conception, as described by Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno.

In *On Being a Muslim*, Farid Esack also advocates an individual subjectivity characterized by reflexivity and followed up by action. However, his focus is not a *jihad* against an infidel Egyptian government or an Israeli-US conspiracy, but rather a battle against one's animal instincts, as well as against an injustice defined in universal terms. Esack characterizes radical Islam as a path "committed to social justice, to individual liberty and the quest for the Transcendent who is beyond all institutional religious and dogmatic constructions; an Islam that challenges us to examine our faith in personally and socially relevant terms."³⁵ Thus, for Esack, like for al-Zawahiri, there is no difference between personal religion and social activism—the two are both facets of the belief in a transcendent, unified God. However, Esack is an advocate of changing oneself to be a better person in conformance with the spirit rather than the letter of Islamic law. In this vein, he advocates a constant reflexivity and self-renewal, writing that "the very idea of self-renewal, *islah*, implies the freedom to choose to renew one's life."³⁶ Further, and equally significant

is the idea that the socio-economic system wherein we find ourselves—irredeemably capitalist, racist and patriarchal—does what it does but I am responsible for my reaction; I can decide to be a victim of this system or a part of a comprehensive struggle for freedom and justice; if the economic system causes a recession then I do have a choice: to organize or starve.³⁷

In this worldview, change begins in the internal life of an individual, who then becomes empowered and works to better society. Although both Esack and al-Zawahiri advocate cultivation of reflexive subjectivity and personal empowerment, Esack's motivation is to show that each individual has choices in life even when he or she thinks there are none—he notes that

“the great tragedy of our lives is often our inability to see that we can actually remould them.”³⁸ In contrast, for al-Zawahiri, subjectivity has only one purpose and one possible choice—waging a battle for Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state.

Like al-Zawahiri, Esack also emphasizes the practical manifestations of subjectivity over the spiritual. Although he is a strong advocate of spiritual self-renewal, he clearly believes that it is an individual’s actions and choices that ultimately determine his or her course in life: “our choices are indicators of who we really are, of our values and unfulfilled aspirations.”³⁹ Esack is particularly critical of “Readers Digest Islam,” “a kind of Islam that sits comfortably with everyone who does not want to disturb the peace—even if the peace hides the demons of racism, sexism and economic exploitation.”⁴⁰ In a stinging censure of quietist piety, Esack equates a purely private expression of religion with a perpetuation of an unjust system. For him, “however valuable personal virtue may be, it is often an extension of entire system of exploitation and evil. Personal morality or faith within the framework of those systems or without challenging them and their advocates is really of little consequence.”⁴¹ Like al-Zawahiri, who is a product of his Egyptian context, Esack is clearly, and quite consciously, influenced by his South African environment and his work as an anti-apartheid activist.

Thus, Esack’s Islam, like al-Zawahiri’s, is not a safe cocoon that insulates one from the vagaries of life. Quite the opposite—it is a tool for battling injustice and evil in the world and a goad for change. While neither man would probably recognize the other as having the same opinion on anything, the difference between them is not one of attitudes to subjectivity—both are firm advocates of cultivating it—but of the end goals they wish to achieve once the awareness of Muslims has been raised. Farid Esack universalizes the ethics of Islam until they cannot be confined to any particular religion and wants to use them to fight injustice and inequality wherever they may be found, while al-Zawahiri is firmly rooted in the specifics of Islamic law and a desire to reestablish the caliphate.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation of identity and discourse is endemic to modernity. In a specifically Islamic context, what is distinctive about the modern era

is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involve people on a mass scale. They also necessarily involve an awareness of other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions. Mass education and mass communication in the modern world facilitate an awareness of the new and unconventional. In changing the style and scale of possible discourse, these tools reconfigure the nature of religious thought and action, create new forms of public space, and encourage debate over meaning.⁴²

The term “possible” is particularly important to the implications of the above passage since the widening of the boundaries of the imaginary is an important part of the modern condition, in which “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.”⁴³ However, while the fragmentation of social identity and of one’s conception of what is possible in life is usually perceived as liberating in the West, it often has the opposite effect in Islamic societies, where greater value is given to the concept of cohesion and unity both of self and of society. One of the reasons for a negative attitude to fragmentation is the Islamic concept of *tauhid*, the idea that everything is united in being an aspect of the Divine as a social

and political ideal. Hence, in a *tauhipi* society, there would be no separate spheres of life such as political, cultural or economic; instead, all would be part of a whole organism and united through their adherence to the laws of Islam. However, while Esack embraces fragmentation as central to the process of understanding and living with the Other while simultaneously affirming his belief in the unity of all through Allah, al-Zawahiri rejects fragmentation as divisive and calls for unity in the *umma* (community of Muslims) in order to better wage battle against the infidel, both Western and non-Western.

That Ayman al-Zawahiri is firmly against the fragmentation characteristic of modern life comes through clearly in *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*. As the foundation of his thought, he affirms God's integrity and authority, writing of Sayyid Qutb, that his "call for loyalty to God's oneness and to acknowledge God's sole authority and sovereignty was the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad."⁴⁴ As the call for loyalty in the passage above indicates, al-Zawahiri felt that the idea of God's unity was something that needed to be defended, perhaps from the onslaught of modernity.

Other passages extol the virtue of political unity among Muslims in the Middle East. In an interesting analysis, al-Zawahiri contends that the reason why the United States is assisting the Russian Federation in its war against Chechnya is to prevent the formation of a "mujahid Islamic belt to the South of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan...the belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia." In this sense, unity is not just a spiritual concept for al-Zawahiri but a political one as well that can be exploited for military gain. Further, he explains that "the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation," which "will topple a basic ally of the United States in its battle against the Islamic jihadist reawakening."⁴⁵ In a similarly politically astute passage, al-Zawahiri avers that the creation of Israel was vital to Western interests because it "separates Egypt and Syria, the two major regions that for several years served as a wall of steadfastness against the Crusades."⁴⁶ For al-Zawahiri, then, the spiritual concept of *tauhipi* is directly linked with its political counterpart, providing a useful rationale for continuing *jihadi* against both Western governments and domestic ones.

Farid Esack also recognizes the fragmented nature of identity in the modern context, acknowledging that "we all comprise multiple identities, depending on where we come from, what we believe in, where we are and whom we are interacting with." Although identity may seem fixed, Esack insists that "we and the way in which we view ourselves are really ever changing."⁴⁷ For Esack, unlike for al-Zawahiri, unity is an illusory concept that hides other desires, such as a yearning for power or desire for control over the self or over others. While he admits that "few aspirations seem to be as sacred to Muslims as the quest for unity," he contends that such a goal, as it is currently conceptualized (both by thinkers like al-Zawahiri and more mainstream Islamic intellectuals) is an unachievable one.⁴⁸ Instead, Esack argues that real unity is based on pluralism, in both a religious and political sense—a pluralism "based upon a refusal to engage in the blanket rubbishing of those with whom we disagree"⁴⁹ and a true engagement with the spiritual Other, whether Christian, Jewish, or something else altogether.⁵⁰ In fact, in a controversial move for a self-labeled Islamic intellectual, he acknowledges in *On Being a Muslim* the spiritual and intellectual influence of Brother Norman Wray, a Catholic monk stationed in Karachi. For Esack, as for Abdolkarim Soroush, a prominent Iranian thinker, "a

proper understanding of Islam enjoins dialogue, a willingness to understand the opinions of others, adaptation and civility.”⁵¹

Although Esack is skeptical of the role that Islamic traditions have been made to play by contemporary Islamists—for example, as substitutions for legal reform or as buttresses for racist and sexist social systems—he does not discount their power and usefulness in society. He sees the importance of Islamic rituals in their ability to “bind [Moslems] to historical traditions and to the community,” connecting people across the globe who live vastly different lives. In this, he echoes Benedict Andersen, who saw a similar uniting role for print capitalism European and colonial societies in their nationalist period.⁵² Further, Esack considers prayer essential for Muslims, since it “is truly an institution of *tauhid*, the oneness of Allah, reflecting it and directed towards it.”⁵³ Accordingly, Esack doesn’t so much seek to alter Islamic traditions as to reintegrate them in a different way into the lives of Muslims, i.e., as rituals that connect Muslim individuals to the larger community of Muslims (*umma*) as well as a source of inspiration for social action, rather than as a literal source of emulation. In a different way than Ayman al-Zawahiri, then, Farid Esack seeks to create unity among Muslims, but it is a unity based on pluralism and inclusion rather than on the Manichean world view articulated by al-Zawahiri.

Power and Legitimacy

The questions of power and legitimacy occupy a central place in the lexicon of problems and uncertainties that abound in the modern Middle East. In that context, the issues of secularism and the role that religion should play in the public sphere have been particularly problematic ones in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A related issue concerns that of the source of legitimacy of Middle Eastern governments—are they to draw their legitimacy from direct reference to Islamic tradition or base it upon the democratic institutions established by their regimes? In one view, articulated by many scholars of both modernity and of the Middle East, “modern is modern, in a sense, to the degree that it is secular”⁵⁴ However, according to scholar, John Esposito, “the contemporary Islamic revival has challenged many of the presuppositions of Western liberal secularism and development theory that modernization means the inexorable or progressive secularization and Westernization of society.”⁵⁵ He argues that far from needing to establish Western traditions of democratic rule, Muslims are, in fact, developing their own indigenous forms of political participation “appropriate to Islamic values and realities.”⁵⁶ Against the background of this widespread debate regarding the form of government appropriate to Islamic nations and their sources of legitimacy, Farid Esack and Ayman al-Zawahiri represent two opposite poles of opinion. While neither questions the need to vest legitimacy within the boundaries of a nation-state, al-Zawahiri rejects all forms of democracy and constitutionalism and advocates the establishment of an Islamic state, while Esack sees democracy as the only possible legitimate form of government in the current era. Interestingly, both advocate their respective positions based on reference to a principle of “justice,” that both derive from the Qur’an and other Islamic traditional sources.

In *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, al-Zawahiri makes several explicit references to the goal of the Islamic fundamentalist movement as he sees it, namely, “to topple the government and establish an Islamic state.”⁵⁷ Specifically, he emphasizes to the need for the Islamist movement to control a physical piece of territory in the Middle East, ostensibly, to establish a truly Islamic nation-state: “The jihad movement must adopt its plan on the basis of controlling a piece of land in the heart of the Islamic world on which it could establish and

protect the state of Islam and launch its battle to restore the rational caliphate based on the traditions of the Prophet.”⁵⁸ Further, he contends that any non-Islamic Middle Eastern government is illegitimate and that “the idea of...submission to the secular constitution imposed by referendums and the recognition of the legitimacy of the government had become worn-out ideas in the minds of Islamists.”⁵⁹ Finally, al-Zawahiri refers to the need for the creation of a public sphere and participation of the larger Muslim community in the project of nation-building, stating that “the jihad movement must be in the middle, or ahead of, the nation. It must be extremely careful not to get isolated from its nation or engage the government in the battle of the elite against authority.”⁶⁰

Although al-Zawahiri may proclaim his desire to establish a political community exactly like the one headed by the Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, the above passages show that his conception of power arrangements and notions of political legitimacy are strikingly modern. First, although al-Zawahiri writes that “it is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory,” his understanding of what constitutes “the caliphate” bears an uncanny resemblance to the modern nation-state, firmly rooted within geographical boundaries and defined by an ethnic-religious nationalism. Second, the fact that he needs to refer to the illegitimacy of the current Egyptian government means that it is still considered by some as legitimate; al-Zawahiri here implies that the Islamic government established by fundamentalists will have a better source of legitimacy than current Middle Eastern governments. Finally, his call for popular participation in government and for the creation of a public sphere are a direct result of penetration of Western Enlightenment ideas of government legitimation through public participation. Although al-Zawahiri is scornful of Western democracy, viewing them as corrupt and anti-Islamic, he clearly advocates some form of popular participation in government processes and a type of governmental accountability that in today’s world is only found in democracies.⁶¹ Thus, although al-Zawahiri’s rhetoric may sound as if it advocates a return to pre-modernity, a closer analysis of his statements reveals that his concepts of power and legitimacy are firmly rooted in liberal modernity. In fact, he explicitly rejects authoritarianism and strongly criticizes its application by secular governments in the Middle East.⁶²

Like al-Zawahiri, Esack views Islam as inherently political, writing that “if there is one major world religion that is unambiguously identified as having a political agenda, then it is Islam.” However, for Esack, all religions and, in fact, all human relationships, are political because “if politics is really about access to and exercise of power, then there is precious little in human relationships void of politics.”⁶³ After establishing the political nature of all human interactions, Esack goes on to advocate for a social activism based on universal values of justice and equality. Unlike al-Zawahiri, Esack rejects the need for a Muslim political party (let alone an Islamic state), writing that

Muslim parties are really a negative response to social insecurity and fear of the unknown...The idea is to retreat into the comfort of well-worn clichés about Islam having all the solutions and the Qur’an being our only constitution. This position shows no understanding of the complexities of the problems facing our country [South Africa], nor any appreciation of how Islam translates into tangible and practical policies for governing a modern state.⁶⁴

For Esack, the establishment of an Islamic state and the installation of the Shari'ah as the law of the land is not the goal but the means that will "lead to the emergence of a social system based on Allah's will. This means that the laws of Islam must never be distorted to destroy the morality of Islam."⁶⁵ The main tenet of such a social system in Esack's view will clearly be equal justice for all, Muslim and non-Muslim, male and female, under the law.⁶⁶ Finally, unlike al-Zawahiri, Esack advocates the creation of Western-style constitutional democracies everywhere, arguing for the enshrinement of universal values in the constitution, which he defines as "a contract between a state and its citizens, and among all the citizens of the state."⁶⁷ For Esack, a government is legitimate to the extent that it upholds the rights and freedoms granted to its citizens in a publicly ratified constitution and to the degree to which it allows and encourages public participation in governance.

As can be clearly seen from the above comparison, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack have similar assumptions about the form of a modern government and its sources of legitimacy (some form of popular representation). The differences between them clearly lie in the degree to which they believe that specific religious injunctions would be formally enshrined as law. Ayman al-Zawahiri advocates the establishment of an Islamic state based on the literal interpretation of Qur'an and Islamic traditions of the Prophet (Sunna). Although his state has a modern form, its content would, to the extent possible, be Islamic—that is, a top-down, legal Islamization of all facets of society would compel all who live within that society to live by Islamic law as interpreted by al-Zawahiri and other fundamentalists. In contrast, Farid Esack argues that Islamic texts and traditions should be mined for their universal moral values and the rest should be discarded as inapplicable to the governance of a modern state. He further avers that since Islamic morality is "intrinsically related to a comprehensive Islamic moral-ethical worldview," it is unreasonable and unjust to demand that others adhere to it.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In an article titled, "Framing Processes and Social Movements," sociologists Benford and Snow discuss the ways in which social movement ideologies (frames) are constructed and used to articulate a particular movement's positions, to diagnose existing problems and to motivate the movement's participants to action. "Collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition,...make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change." These core framing tasks are termed "diagnostic framing," "prognostic framing" and "motivational framing."⁶⁹ The responses to modernity of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack can be usefully analyzed in terms of the above model. As can be seen from the above comparison, al-Zawahiri and Esack share a diagnostic frame regarding the ills of modern Islamic societies. They both point to a pervasive apathy in regarding political and social action, fragmentation of and collapse of community, and a lack of political legitimacy of extant Middle Eastern governments. However, in an interesting twist, although the diagnostic frames of Esack and al-Zawahiri seem to have many points of intersection, their prognostic and motivational frames seem not to exist on the same grid at all. While Zawahiri's prognosis is the victory of the Islamic fundamentalist movement against both Western and domestic secular enemies, and the eventual establishment of a truly Islamic state in the Middle East, Esack awaits the normalization of Western secular social standards among Muslims and their full application in the political and social milieux of Islamic states. Thus, al-Zawahiri's motivational repertoire is heavily imbued with references to the martyrdom of

Islamists at the hands of secular regimes and the injustices inflicted on Islamic nations by Western imperial ones, while Esack uses references to the universal values of Islam to motivate his audience. Interestingly, however, it is Esack's text that quotes heavily from the Qur'an and Hadith while al-Zawahiri's contains not a single Qur'anic quotation. That fact, in addition to the many others presented in this essay, should go far to dispel the notion of the anti-modern nature of Islamic fundamentalist movements.

End Notes

1. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 15.
2. Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). The “Manifesto of the Communist Party was originally published in London in 1848.
3. Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 228.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufman, ed., (New York: Vintage, 1967), 59; italics in the original.
5. *Ibid.*, 77; italics in the original.
6. Vahdat, 231; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7. Interestingly, contemporary anthropologist Arjun Appadurai concurs with Nietzsche, writing that “there is growing evidence that consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in short, agency.” Appadurai here emphasizes the role of aesthetics as imagination, which, “in its collective forms...creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule,” as well as, presumably, of revolutions.
7. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, trans., (London: Routledge, 1992), 123-124.
8. Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 129.
9. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, George Schwab, trans., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20, 22.
10. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 8.
11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, trans., (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 3.
12. Lambert Zuidervaart, “Theodor Adorno.” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2003 Edition, Edward N. Zalta ed., (Accessed at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2003/entries/adorno/>).
13. Horkheimer and Adorno, xviii.
14. Zuidervaart.
15. Adorno and Horkheimer, 16.
16. *Ibid.*, 120.
17. *Ibid.*, 6.
18. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 11.
19. *Ibid.*, 16.
20. *Ibid.*, 12.
21. *Ibid.*, 171.
22. Appadurai, 33.
23. Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, (Oxford. UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 95.
24. Giddens, 53.
25. *Ibid.*, 21.

26. Ibid., 79.
27. Vahdat, xiii-xiv.
28. Ibid., 134.
29. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Parts one through eleven of serialized excerpts from Egyptian Al-Jihad organization leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's book *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*", accessed at http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ayman_bk.html, 15. In using the term, "mankind" instead of a more gender-neutral term, I am emphasizing the fact that this document was written, in my view, only for men, since a discussion of women and their potential role in conducting the jihad are conspicuously absent from the text.
30. Ibid., 73.
31. Ibid., 5-6. The Arab Afghans were young men from all over the Islamic world but mostly from the Middle East who came to Afghanistan in the 1980s to participate in the jihad against the Russians. Despite Zawahiri's assertions to the contrary, the US government funded many of these mujahidin groups, including some led by Osama Bin Laden.
32. Ibid., 20.
33. Lawrence Wright, "The Man Behind Bin Laden: How an Egyptian Doctor Became a Master of Terror," *The New Yorker*, 16 September, 2002, Part IV.
34. Zawahiri, 28.
35. Esack, 2.
36. Ibid., 39.
37. Ibid., 42.
38. Ibid., 48.
39. Ibid., 77.
40. Ibid., 93.
41. Ibid., 94.
42. Dale Eickelman, "Who Speaks for Islam? Inside the Islamic Reformation," in Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman, eds., *An Islamic Reformation?* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 19.
43. Appadurai, 53.
44. al-Zawahiri, 15. Sayyid Qutb was the major and best-known ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, a society founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 that was a cornerstone of the Islamic revival in the Middle East in the twentieth century. Qutb wrote the widely influential book *Malim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts on the Road) in which he argued that social systems were either *Nizam Islami* (truly Islamic) or *Nizam Jahi* (pre-Islamic ignorance and barbarism). One of his greatest innovations was to apply the term *jahiliyya*, which is used in the Quran to refer to pre-Islamic Arabia, to modern Middle Eastern society, which paved the way for a line of thought in which forcible physical reconquest became permissible. He also provided an ideological framework in which Muslim fundamentalists could use principles of Islam, rather than Western categories like capitalism, socialism, democracy, etc., to analyze society and to fight against an unjust government. Qutb was executed by the Nasser regime in 1966, but his work remains extraordinarily popular.
45. Ibid., 44.
46. Ibid., 62.
47. Esack, 137.

48. Ibid., 143.
49. Ibid., 147.
50. Ibid., 33.
51. Eickelman, 22.
52. Esack, 25.
53. Ibid., 27.
54. Johnathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization." in *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4, (October 2003): 1066.
55. John Esposito, "Islam and Civil Society," in John Esposito and Francois Burgat, eds., *Modernizing Islam*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 98.
56. Ibid., 99.
57. al-Zawahiri, 46.
58. Ibid., 76.
59. Ibid., 20.
60. Ibid., 74.
61. Ibid., 69.
62. Ibid., 20.
63. Esack, 87.
64. Ibid., 165-166.
65. Ibid., 104.
66. Ibid., 168.
67. Ibid., 169.
68. Ibid., 166.
69. R. Benford and D. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *American Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 615.

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