

Report from *Conflict Forum's* Discussion Seminar on  
Perceptions of Identity:

## Islamist Identity and Western Neoconservatism

Beirut, 19 June 2007

(This report is also available in Arabic)

Conflicts Forum: Beirut - London - Washington

## **Project Outline**

We are at a point of conflict and growing instability in the Middle East where the West's projection of its perception of Islamist identity is no longer recognizable to Islamists themselves; and the Islamist perception of American motivation for actions has little if any resonance with ordinary Americans. Both sides are ideologically committed to the correctness of their perception of the other's identity.

The purpose of this series of discussions is to look at the two alternative perceptions of identity in an effort to understand why each seems so at odds with the experience of the other. The aim is to explore how each arrived at its perception and narrative of the other in order to probe the means by which each narrative can at least be recognizable to the other – even if there remains disagreement about the vision of the future which each implies.

The participants believed that without some better comprehension of how and why the perception held by the other is so divergent from the impression held by them, the scope for meaningful exchange of ideas was limited against the background of mutually incompatible views of each other's identity vision of its own history and political future.

This first introductory discussion examined the routes by which Islamist identity has been constructed in the US. Further discussions will focus on the way American identity appears to Americans and why its perception in the Muslim world is so much at odds with its own appreciation of the role of the US in the world.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Alastair Crooke, Co-Director, *Conflicts Forum* - "Identity Slander"**

My experience as a staff member on Senator George Mitchell's Fact Finding Committee on the causes of the Second Palestinian Intifada underlined that facts were impossible to establish in the Middle East. No one could agree on 'facts' – each party had their irreconcilable narrative. We concluded that the most useful thing we could do was to sketch perceptions on both sides - in the hope that both would look at our report and say: "well, we do not agree with the other side's narrative of what happened; but at least we now see how they might understand it that way".

We are in a war of identities. After 1948, Israelis tried to create an identity of a homogenous Israeli people as a pivot of a centralized and militarized power. Defining this national common family was not achieved simply by language; but was created by forging the history and ideology to support this identity. Even archaeology was co-opted to reassemble from the fragments of archaeology a narrative of a unified continuous Jewish involvement that privileged the Jewish aspect of this historical experience and downplayed the heterogenous nature of the past. Edward Said noted that Israelis deliberately chose to have a closed down, narrowed identity which excluded other communities' histories – in order to strengthen the claim to be a sovereign people and to justify a strong centralized Jewish executive power.

The Israeli pursuit of a strong nationalist state mirrored the US' own history. These were people who had come from the old Europe with a clear sense of purpose and identity. They seized the lands of the Native Indian inhabitants, and created their identity that almost erased that of the Native Americans. Today what remains of their identity is to be found in a few museums and native Indian 'reservations'.

In this struggle over identity, US conservatives describe Islamism as backward looking, resistant to modernity, and totalitarian in character. There are three main factors underlying this perception:

The first is a concept of power. After the last European war there was an American preoccupation centered on the Chicago school of thought with the Weimar Republic and its lessons for other liberal countries.

Political philosophers - some from Germany in the US - concluded that much of the failure of the Weimar Republic was to be explained by its tolerance of the threats that could undermine and destroy it. Philosophers identified the principal threats to liberal society as multiculturalism, moral relativism and utilitarianism.

They viewed these three factors as a centrifuge pulling the society apart – spinning off individuals in pursuit of their self-interest. People would end up in a bubble for pursuing their own interests in a society in which everyone's view had equal value. They believed that in such a society it would be impossible to call for

sacrifice or for idealism: if no one's view had any more merit than that of the next person, it would be difficult to espouse idealism.

They argued that only by providing an external threat could society be prevented from fragmenting. It had to be presented in terms of an extreme (good and evil) and posed in terms of clear dichotomy - It has to be a threat which is absolute. Only this could revive a readiness to sacrifice and provide a pole around which the nation could gather.

Allied to this was a wider conservative thinking about power: some US conservatives had a view of power that the idea of improving society was a matter for moral philosophers. The purpose and use of power was to ensure survival - and in order to survive you had to defeat your enemies. The - conservatives argued that politicians should concentrate on strength and not on the moral aspect - this was a matter for moral philosophers. From this has come a strong sense of the state needing to build power effectively in order to defeat its enemies: The failure in the Weimar Republic – and the weakness of liberal society – essentially was a failure of will power. This view was not accepted by everyone, but has been a powerful element in some circles in the US.

The second strand influencing the US conservatives has been Bernard Lewis' writings extolling the enforced Westernization of Turkey in the 1920s. He argued that the Turkish model was the future for the Middle East. His views have had disproportionate impact because of his close association with Dick Cheney.

The third element was the Cold War experience: when Reagan proposed putting pressure on Russia by creating an arms race that would overstretch it economically, all the experts laughed at him. But, when finally the Soviet empire imploded, they came to the view that all that was necessary was to poke at these hollow tyrannies, and they would implode like burned paper to ash. They poked at Ceausescu and Romania, and it collapsed. And from its ashes came democracy. With this experience and the belief in a benevolent US hegemony, some saw countries like Iran as another Romania – as a hollow tyranny similar to Romania. All it required was a little pressure and a push - and this hollow empty structure would simply collapse before US power as Ceausescu's Romania and the Soviet Union had - because they had no values.

These three components combined together provide the elements that leaders in the US and Europe draw on in asserting that Islam is hollow and is a reaction against modernity.

So what can we do? The first thing is language. Language is being used as a tool in this war of identities, and not as a means of communication, nor used accurately. Language is being deliberately polarized to undermine and diminish the ideology of the adversary.

One way language could be used is to reject the concepts that underlie this defamation of identity: for example, when the West claims to be the most advanced society, it imputes a spurious responsibility for global leadership that it is possible to question.

Beyond this it is also important to question the precepts of this conservative narrative by also pasting up the Islamist identity more plainly. Some elements of Islamist identity have been well articulated - the struggle for justice, for a more just world order and for putting the human being back at the centre of society. The question comes back to what I mentioned earlier: how do we get to a position where people in the West can say, 'I may not want to follow that myself, but at least I can understand why they think as they think', and in this way, people can acknowledge different perceptions of identity.

## DISCUSSION

**Question - Sheikh Jaradeh:** I'd like to know what you mean by narrative?

**AC:** I was separating the two elements: how we see ourselves today - which will be a composite of views. I'm describing this as identity. But when I talk of narrative, I mean how communities construct a history to suit their present circumstances. We became secular when our 'caliphate' broke up and we divided into separate states. The West views history as a linear continuum along which we move forward to modernity. This received a strong impetus at the time of the scientific discoveries in the 19th century by Darwin and others - ideas of evolution promoted views that some races were more evolved than others, and some 'backward' races die away due to evolution. A former Prime Minister of Britain in 1890s spoke about the inevitability of backward races from disappearing from the globe. Much of Western history has been rewritten to diminish the religious aspect - politics and economics seem to be the drivers of change - and has been re-written as a story of progress from 'backwardness' to Western 'modernity'. This is not an accurate or true account of what happened. This mythical account of the Western steady progress towards a secular liberal future is what I am describing as the Western 'narrative'.

**Question - Sheikh Jaradeh:** In light of what you're saying, the solution is not to think how to communicate with the other but how peoples should strive to be themselves. This means there will be sharp identities. Does this serve our way of thinking or does it help Leo Strauss' emphasis on the desirability of having enemies?

**AC:** There is no reason to presume that we'll all converge and that we will all be more alike. It is equally likely that we'll diverge and have different identities in the global order. The question is how do we accommodate different identities in a global order that is configured by powers that claim special rights?

## P R E S E N T A T I O N S

### **Michel Samaha, former Minister of Information, Lebanon**

Confining ourselves to perceptions, I believe, will confine us to a perpetual state of clashes. The issue is not so much that of perception; but between not knowing and not wanting to know.

I want to speak about the means of communication that are controlled by the West: They use Leo Strauss for their own purposes without regard to the reality of what Strauss wrote. I will give examples: Countries raise their new elites through universities and think-tanks. The key element here therefore is the relationship between universities and think-tanks and their funders. In the past 10 years, we have witnessed a concentration of funding that goes to the media, news agencies, think-tanks and universities – all from a single focus politically. It is here that the new elite are prepared. Here we see the importance of Strauss, Daniel Pipes and Bernard Lewis: It is about preparing a climate of opinion in which the elite are educated in order to underpin narrow political agendas.

Therefore, how do I, as a Christian, a son of the Orient, respond? I have absorbed in my make-up aspects from Islam. I interact with Islam every day; it is a part of me and elements are common to my and to their narrative; but the materialistic West in this era cannot understand this co-existence. But we do not co-exist: we exist together, which is different. The West comes and wants to intervene between co-existing partners. The effect of this is to create conflict and tension.

**Question:** Can we say this is a Takfiri trend?

**MS:** We say we have our own (Christian) culture; but when they talk about it being a Judeo-Christian culture, we Lebanese Christians cannot recognise this concept. When the US adopts this language they are playing the role of the Takfiris, and adopting the role of Takfiris towards other Christians - for example painting them as outside of the true Christian legacy, and suggesting a divide with Islam, rather than the commonality many Christians experience.

### **Michael Ancram, Member of Parliament UK and former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Shadow Foreign Secretary and Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Party**

I am not a philosopher; but a practical politician and historian. What has struck me as a historian is that these great powers that claim to be advanced and modern inevitably are those powers possessing the greatest military force. Pax Romana was primarily an expression of military power; The British Empire, Pax Britannica, was an empire, based on the strength of its army and its navy; and Pax Americana rests upon its overwhelming military resources. Looking back, it

is clear that the philosophical constructs of Pax Romana and Pax Britannica were no more than justifications projected to retrospectively validate their having and using military might in pursuit of their own interests.

Over the last 15 years, the US has given philosophical justification of a sort as justification for their military superiority. On a historical point, I want to mention that although the neoconservatives became a significant part of the US politics in the last nine years or so, Cheney and Rumsfeld began their political agenda in the late 1960s - it was a political agenda of US hegemony. It was only in the 1990s that they struck upon neoconservatism as the suitable vehicle with which to pursue their independently conceived political agenda.

I was sent to Northern Ireland to find a way to reconcile two irreconcilable partners. I decided that the first thing was to read history. I saw that history, like perceptions, can take two forms. I learnt that I had to read the history of both sides. We all agree we are dealing with perceptions and perceptions are created by history by one side or another and today by the electronic media. I'm frightened by the electronic media as we humans believe what our eyes see; and when we see something on TV and the Internet, we believe it. TV can be the most dishonest of all the media because it depends on which direction the camera is pointing. One problem we face today is that the West sees different TV pictures to those seen in the Islamic world and both sides believe the pictures they see.

Alastair Crooke gave a good analysis of the US conservatives. He started with the Weimar Republic and talked about the reasons why American academics at Chicago concluded that it failed. However, my perceptions as to why it failed are different. My understanding is that after the First World War, and the sanctions that were imposed on Germany by the victors, there was an underlying sense of shame imposed on Germans which the Weimar Republic did nothing to remove and Germans looked for a way out from their situation. This combined with economic despair gave rise to Fascism.

The lessons from this are:

WW1: Alastair was talking about "advanced" nations claim to the moral high ground on the basis of their being 'modern'. The European component of WW1 however was between the most advanced nations of its time - the UK, France, Hungary, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia – and between these advanced nations there were no appreciable philosophical differences. But despite the fact that all the participants claimed to be advanced, and the similarity of their outlooks, narratives were created to demonise each against the other. I have documents in my history collection of examples of British propaganda that propagated the message that the Germans ate babies. This was done to create enmity in pursuance of a political agenda. You can fabricate enemies from the fantasies of your imagination if that is required to pursue a political agenda.

The importance of this is that perception of intellectual conflict is not an intellectual conflict in its own right - it is conflict created for the purpose of pursuing a political agenda.

In Northern Ireland where I worked with Lord Alderdice, it was clear that the lack of understanding of the 'other' was the weapon in the hands of those with a political agenda - since what we don't understand, we fear, and what we fear, we demonise. Either we have wrong perceptions; or we have failed to learn.

The best way is to talk; only by talking can we begin to explore our differences. We can clear genuine misunderstandings and where there are genuine differences, we can explore how to manage them. Dialogue is not about agreeing, it is about understanding the past of the person with whom you are talking.

To me narrative must start with each side explaining their perceptions, concerns and grievances - not in expectation that the other side will agree with them, but in the expectation that the other side will understand them. By doing this you can start a process of building respect - and the use of language is very important in this. Sometimes you have to find ways that both sides can understand from their different positions.

Now, the situation is that we talk at each other at a great distance through megaphones. We do not sit and discuss. It took a long time in Northern Ireland. We started, not by negotiating; not by imposing difficult conditions; not by seeking commitments; but genuinely trying to understand each other. From that, came the basis for an agreement which has not required everyone to sign up to the others position, but has allowed them to co-operate. So narrative, dialogue and discussion is the way to get out of problems.

**Sheikh Hneini, Director, *Hamza Association*, *Saida* and *Association of Muslim Scholars***

I have two points: First, one aspect of our outlook and culture is to be open-minded and to deal with human society as a whole without divisions - of race, belief, ethnic group. We have lived for many years in communities where there were Muslims, Christians and Jews existing together. We really are a pluralistic and multi-religious society.

We are currently at a crossroads in history. At an earlier crossroads, at a historic meeting under the auspices of the Ottoman Caliph, many concerns and differences of view, among them the wish to bring an end to the concept of slavery, were aired; but most were successfully resolved at that meeting. The point is that agreement was possible. Furthermore we abided by those commitments, which is why, we as Muslims, find ourselves perplexed by the present inability to resolve matters in a similar fashion.

The essence of the topic of today's discussion is specifically the way in which the West deals with the Arab and Muslim world and the Third World more generally. It is based on American conservative philosophies. The key to this for us, as Muslims, is jurisprudence. A person or politician may advance a controversial or



damaging idea; but in our system when views are propagated against the weight of Islamic rulings, scholars will stand up and say that it is wrong. This happened when Bin Laden attempted to divide the world between believers and non-believers. But Western leaders assume the right to issue their 'rulings' and then turn them into instruments of repression, but there is no one to stand up and to contradict them. We paid dearly to have a system of checks and balances in our system, and we suffer now from the West's lack of such mechanisms.

**Lord Alderdice, UK House of Lords, President of *Liberal International* and International Commissioner overseeing the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland**

My experience from Northern Ireland was that it took years to develop engagement between the leaders of political parties; and then many more years to develop and implement new institutions which helped us to disagree in a peaceful way. Lebanon seems to be more complicated and difficult, but some of the principles and lessons from NI might be useful.

One common thread has been the division of people into conflicting stories (narratives) - which can become so deep that common humanity is sometimes lost. The deeper antagonisms become, the more each side retreats into itself and turns against the other.

It is important to understand that the analysis and perspectives of the neoconservatives is not shared by a majority of people, and is not shared by most intellectuals or religious people. There are profound disagreements about it. The Blair and Bush governments are more unpopular in their own countries than any previous governments of previous times. So a positive thing about this deeply worrying issue is that the people of the US and the UK are rebelling against this.

As people, we don't only operate on the basis of what we think. Our thinking is informed by what we feel - when we feel frightened, we have frightening thoughts. When we feel humiliated and shamed, we have angry thoughts. Many people after the events of 9/11 and 7/7 are frightened and do not know what to think. My experience from psychiatry is that some people who themselves have been abused, go on to abuse others. When I started to work with republicans who were using terrorism for political purposes in Northern Ireland, I began to see it as not just a political agenda, but as an emotional reaction against centuries of discrimination and abuse.

This led me to look at the issue of shame and humiliation in the origins of terrorism and violence. I found that people who use violence have often been humiliated and shamed and have had no peaceful way of resolving their own problems. People who fled from Ireland to the USA did so because they were being abused and suffered persecution - both Protestants and Catholics. And

when they got there, they abused the people - the Native Americans - who they found there. But this puts us in a very dangerous cycle.

**Sheikh Jaradeh, Director, *Institute of Sapiential Knowledge for Religious and Philosophical Studies***

Sheikh Jaradeh opened by noting that state 'power', which had been the object of Leo Strauss' musings, has become less effective now than it had been at the time that he was writing. The Sheikh suggested that tension between East and West of course did not begin with, and was not caused by, Leo Strauss' commentaries; but had much older roots.

The Sheikh also pointed to an important conceptual distinction between the political theory itself and between those thinkers who have made use of political theory in order to support their own political agendas. Strauss, for example, did not reflect in his work, in the Sheikh's view, the 'real Socrates', but recreated him as a sort of 'prophet', an 'elder' or a 'sage', who could reveal absolute truth; but, equally importantly, ascribes to himself the right to hide truth as well as to reveal it. Effectively, Strauss had presented the world with a "new Socrates" of his own creation in place of the original Greek version. The Sheikh speculated that - who knows - one day, the present followers of Strauss may present us with a reworked "new Strauss" - to replace the original Strauss of Chicago University.

The conclusion Sheikh Jaradeh drew was that generally it is not the theory itself that triggers conflict, but the political interests and agenda of those who manipulate such theories in pursuit of their own designs. In this case, Strauss' followers had defined 'good' as being devoid of meaning unless a particular 'good' objective had been bestowed through the authority of the state. Conversely from this conflation of 'good' objectives with the interest of the state, 'evil' had become conflated with any state, nation, or a people who threaten those national interests and 'good' national objectives.

Turning to the influence of Bernard Lewis, the Sheikh suggested that his input into the flawed identity attributed to Islam had derived from Lewis' presentation of the concept of jihad. Lewis suggested that jihad, in all its various forms, represented the inner militaristic and violent character of Islam. Lewis went on to suggest that jihad was morally flawed, and therefore was in conflict with Christianity. This was not correct. The concept of jihad had been essentially defensive, and had never had an expansionist or imperial quality to it - Unfortunately some Christian scholars, and indeed even Pope Benedict himself, had contributed to the myth of the violent ethos of Islam. In some respects, the answer to these misunderstandings and misrepresentations ideally should flow from Christians of the Orient: Muslims are geographically tied to the Orient, and the Christians who share the same land and culture should be best placed to bring about an understanding between Islam and the West.

But, for many Christians and Westerners, Islam is viewed as a relic, a hangover from the Middle Ages. They see themselves as duty bound to remove this symbol of regression into the Middle Ages which Islam represents for the West. This conception underpins the view that it is not right to have dialogue with such a 'backward' religion; and it also endorses and confirms the sense of a Western special mission and special rights in the world. Westerners borrow from Strauss

the precept that discerning 'truth' and the 'right of control' lie with the West alone: only the 'noble man' has the right to the 'noble' life, and these 'noble people' – it turns out – are synonymous with the rulers of the West – its academics and its members of think tanks. This self-defined attribute of discerning 'truth' allows these 'noble' people to accuse others as having weapons of mass destruction - even when they know it to be untrue - and to square these lies with their 'noble cause' by telling themselves that this is no more than a 'noble lie'.

Now we see the same pattern of unfounded allegations happening in respect to Iran. US policy-makers are again assuming to themselves those special rights to 'discern' the threats facing the West. At times I wish that Islam was more aggressive in more directly challenging the political interests of the West; but the reality is that Muslims have never posed a real threat to Western policy. Sadly, this image of Islam as a continuing threat to Western interests has been aided and supported by the so-called 'moderate' Muslim leaders who exaggerate these fears to the West.

In my view, the US political weltanschauung is based on the following:

- (i) Its right to appropriate and possess knowledge and science from all sources;
- (ii) Its attachment to the 'survival of the strongest and fittest' principle;
- (iii) That modernity is synonymous with progress towards accumulating and expanding scientific knowledge and experience;
- (iv) That economic development is dependent on acquiring a state of modernity defined in terms of scientific progress.

But Islam, in its turn, has faced its own failings:

- (i) Islam resorted to isolation – a psychological isolation - in defending its identity. Some Islamist movements sought to withdraw from engagement with the wider world in order to accentuate their Islamic identity. This prevented Islam from being open to absorbing Western technology.
- (ii) The adoption of a 'cultural extremism' in respect of formulating the concept of the umma – a position that closed off the umma from absorbing thinking from the West.
- (iii) The adverse impact of Bin Laden and Azzam Abdullah 's concept of Islamic revolution.
- (iv) The loss of the Islamic concept of 'balance' – this is a concept which in Islam expresses more than just an 'equilibrium'; but is a process of cultivating internal personal checks and balances that prevents an individual and a community from oscillating between excessive self-weakness or strength; and which curtails extremes of behaviour and abuses of power. These are:
  - (a) The ability to exercise a psychological self-control – especially in building inner self-assurance and confidence in the face of the psychological warfare of the enemy.
  - (b) The concept of God's possession of 'power'; and the understanding of this attribute of 'power' to enable a human to contrive the willpower with which to confront and overcome disproportionate force used against him or her. This was

conceptualised in Imam Hussein's call for a "victory of blood versus the victory of the sword". In other words, in cultivating the spirit and political will to stand against a superior force.

- (c) Ensuring that any aggressor will fail by creating a steadfastness that will make him despair of achieving victory.
- (d) Ensuring that leaders, with the acquisition of power or office, do not become tyrants; and stay committed to the maintenance of honourable acts in their confrontation with adversaries - if possible.
- (e) To benefit from each individual's skills and capabilities to build a strong community of capability as a wider model to serve all humanity.

This methodology reflects the commitment to community cohesion and community progress. It stands in some tension with the Islamic trend of rejecting any construct of citizenship, but the reason for this rejection was not connected to the principle of citizenship or homeland itself; but lay with the adverse experience of Muslims in the damaging divisions of identity imposed when the West established nation states for Muslim societies in the colonial era.

Finally, I would like to conclude by posing four questions to my Western colleagues:

- (i) Why does the West conflate Arab society with a Bedouin culture? Westerners – particularly those who live among us and see us – are able to observe the social changes in Arab society, yet this progress and change apparently is unrecognised in the West. Is this a problem of perception within the West; or, does it represent the urge within the West to retain the power of control?
- (ii) Why does the West set a code of values for itself which are restricted to itself; and yet seeks to prevent other societies from attaining those values?
- (iii) Why does the West confuse ethnic with religious identity? For example, why are Arabs taken to be synonymous with Muslims, and Muslims as Arabs?
- (iv) How can the West decry Islam's harking back to the origins of its faith - describing this as 'backwardness', when it is the West's clinging to its Romano-Greek roots that underpins its political authenticity and its universality? The West assumes its roots to be evidence of its modernity; whereas Islam's search for inspiration in its roots is signaling 'backwardness' – according to the West?

**Arabic version of this report:** <http://conflictsforum.org/arabic/Islamist-Identity-and-Western-Neoconservatism-Arabic.pdf>

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