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## **Globalization and Political Conflict in the Islamic Context**

### **Introduction**

Thomas Friedman defines the term Globalization as the integration of free market capitalism into virtually every economy in the world. He views this as a dynamic, evolutionary process, with the inevitable struggle of the “Lexus” and the “Olive Tree”. The former is defined as the drive for “sustenance, improvement, prosperity and modernization” whereas the latter is the drive to maintain identity, be it in the form of “a family, a community, a tribe, a nation, a religion or... a place called home” (Thomas L. Friedman, 2000). Arguably, this is truer for Islamic nations than any other countries simply because of the immense importance placed on Olive Trees within the culture. The struggle has led to many forms of political conflict across the globe from terrorism to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes.

The focus of this essay is to define the various aspects in which Islamic nations feel threatened by globalization, and the political conflicts that have arisen thereof. In Friedman’s terms, Islamization and modernization would be an adequate representation of the Olive Tree and the Lexus respectively (Thomas L. Friedman, 2000). The truth is that there are various historical, cultural, economic, and political differences between the two systems. Some Muslim countries have taken to globalization more than others have, but usually because they are under authoritarian regimes. Globalization takes place in these cases since most Islamic dictators tend to be progressive. For the truly democratic states however, globalization has yet to wield its grip. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq are examples of authoritarian governments that were able to

boost foreign investment as opposed to Iran, Syria, Yemen and Sudan. We can infer from this that a majority of the people living in Islamic states are much more wary of globalization.

### **Racial / Ethnic Mistrust**

Broadly speaking, globalization is viewed as a phenomenon purported by the white race. The fact that a majority of Muslim countries share this view is no coincidence however. A significant number of predominantly Muslim countries gained independence from the white colonial powers in the past century. Pakistan gained independence from England in 1947, Senegal and Lebanon gained independence from France in 1960 and 1943 respectively. Since these are relatively recent developments, the memories of economic dominance of the colonial powers still resonate with the general population within the Muslim states. Globalization is seen as another potential method of the west to once again exercise their dominance over the resulting countries. Hence, any intrusion of the west in the domestic policies of the Muslim nations is viewed with considerable mistrust (Thomas, 2003).

### **Democratization**

There is often considerable pressure on Muslim countries to democratize themselves in order to join the global arena. Often, Muslim nations claim to be democracies but do not display the characteristics of a completely democratized state. There are two forms of transitional democracies (or “hybrid regimes”) as outlined by Philippe C. Schmitter (National identity crisis: Democratic pluralism or political discord?2004). These regimes display characteristics of both autocracy and democracy. The first case is where elections are held, but the outcome is known beforehand. Schmitter calls these regimes “Dictablanda”. The second case is where elected governments are often controlled by non-democratically elected agencies such as the military. Schmitter calls these regimes “Democradura”. Dictablanda regimes are more common in Muslim

states with Pakistan being a prime example. The lack of democratization has the potential to cause bitter resentment with the people, as their voices are not heard by the state. In the case of Pakistan, for example, the overall public tends to resist foreign influence even though the Dictablanda regime of General Pervez Musharraf had worked to increase foreign direct investment in the country. Political opposition parties use these events to illicit people against the government and globalization resulting in political conflict within the nation.

### **Economic System Incompatibilities**

Often, in order to secure loans and to benefit from globalization, less developed countries may be coerced to adopt western economic methods in order to be compatible (Thomas, 2003). In contemporary Judeo-Christian tradition, making interest payments is perfectly acceptable, whereas in Islamic theology, the concept of interest has been strictly banned. Muslim states, however, need to make interest payments on loans secured from the IMF and the World Bank. This causes considerable pressure in the Islamic state from religious institutions and their clergy. Globalization, under this pretext, is viewed as an affront to Islamic traditions and values. Muslim states are unique in the world in that the religious institutions and the clergy wield considerable influence on the general population. Furthermore, there is very little separation of the state and religious institutions. Iran is a great example of this since their supreme ruler, the Ayatollah, possesses veto power over state decisions. Due to this, practices that go against the grain of Islam are swiftly denounced and hence, cause considerable political conflict.

### **Loss of Cultural Identity**

In most Muslim countries, traditional values and culture are an extremely important component to the society. Islam often prides itself in the unwavering quality of its members in keeping with Muslim traditions. Globalization forces closed Islamic societies to come into

contact with non-Muslim nations forcing them to view their culture through the eyes of another. The most common issue that arises from this contact is the emancipation of women in the western world. This leads to a clash between the image of people from other cultures and the nations own identity. Furthermore, in light of a better system, the people tend to question their own belief system and traditions ultimately resulting in challenges to the consensus on cultural identity. When consensus upon national identity is lost, an identity crisis emerges (National identity crisis: Democratic pluralism or political discord?2004). The resulting conflict comes about when the traditionalists and the revolutionaries adopt hard stances against each other's views.

### **Unbalanced Peace Dividends**

Incentives for conflict resolution are known as peace dividends. Globalization is largely seen as a way to reduce territoriality, ultimately leading to the weakening of borders and establishing economic ties across the globe. In reality, however, Globalization creates unbalanced outcomes usually with some groups benefiting more than others. In such cases, economic ties are unable to resolve the underlying conflict. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the state of Israel wanted to strengthen economic ties with the Palestinians rather than to grant the state of Palestine independence. For this conflict, the peace dividends accrued solely to the Israelis, who stood to benefit from globalization. Benefits from peace for Palestinians were not realized however, since the Palestinian economy was ill equipped for global integration (Ben-Porat, 2005). Since the benefits from globalization favored the Israelis, Palestinian demands for territory grew stronger and thus led to massive political conflicts between the two.

### **Increases in Inequality**

The benefits of globalization favor the participants rather than the nation as whole. Most African Islamic nations lack the infrastructure to provide the benefits from globalization to the masses. Thus, the few people in positions of power tend to use the benefits for personal gain and capital accumulation rather than using it for nation-building activities. Regime change is quite common in these African states, so the incentives to promote economic development projects are nonexistent (Pearce, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Globalization is beneficial to all states involved, but only if the points above can be overcome. The main reason for the success of globalization in countries such as India and China is due to their flexibility and acceptance of other cultures. By contrast, Islam tends to be very rigid and authoritarian. As noted earlier, Muslims take pride in the fact that their traditions and cultures are intact after so many years. It is exactly this point that keeps Islamic nations on the fringes of globalization. Islamic countries that are welcoming of globalization are usually Dictablanda's where the leaders of the nation have little to no fear of being ousted from power, and are successfully able to suppress political conflicts and uprisings. In cases of Dictablanda's, the people in positions of power are the ones who need the incentive to participate in globalization, which usually results in further consolidation of their power, or significant personal income gains, or both.

## References

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