Talking with Islamists: an overdue task or an exercise in appeasement?

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The article exposes the stereotypes most prevalent in the West about Islamists. The gist of its argument is that the West must talk to Islamists if some form of mutual understanding is to take place. Refusing dialogue under the pretext of stereotypes will not contribute to a resolution of conflicts in the Middle East. The author stresses the need to look into other people’s languages, especially those of the Middle East, in order to understand what drives and motivates them. Language is the key to understanding people’s thinking and the West has not done enough in that respect.

Keywords: Western approach to Islamism; Muslim critique of western society; meaning of language; dialogue

‘So, you spoke to the leaders of Hezbollah?’
‘Yes.’
‘And you also speak with the leaders of Hamas?’
‘Yes.’
‘And they told you that they support democracy?’
‘Yes.’
‘And you believe them?’

With this the leader of a Washington think-tank smiled, satisfied, to her audience and sat down. Clearly the biting scepticism of her question ‘and you believe them?’ was fairly clear. It implies a conviction that Islamists have nothing to say, or if they do speak, and when they do have something to say, that this is just babble with no particular meaning or sense to it. This exchange conveys the sense in the West that when Islamists speak, their language is somehow shadowy, unreachable and coded, whereas our language—the language of the West—is transparent, accessible and honest. When we say we support democracy, we are serious, whereas when Hezbollah or Hamas say that they support democracy, then they, of course, are lying. This is the implication of the way that the question above was framed.

The idea that non-Western cultures and non-Western language are somehow ephemeral and parochial is an idea deeply rooted in colonialism and colonial thinking. In fact, it was the Greeks who coined the word barbarians and barbarism; for them, the people who lived outside the bounds of their civilization were barbarians. And it was from this word literally that they coined the word ba'ba'd—people who stammered and who spoke a language that had no meaning. That is what we call them—barbarians—when we talk about Islamists only speaking in babble today. At that time the Greeks used it in particular with reference to the Persians whom they accused of rejecting the ideas of the Greek classical city state. These people, the Persians, had other ideas—they were somehow uncivilized, slaves to tyranny.

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ISSN 1755-0912 print/ISSN 1755-0920 online
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DOI: 10.1080/17550910801951870
http://www.informaworld.com
The implied sense that they are lying—the deceit that was implied in this question about Islamist discourse, about democracy or about their policy—is also another classical inheritance that we have. This essentially came from Plato who argued very strongly that you simply could not trust other city states. Other city states lied and used subterfuge and deceit in order to try to deceive the Greeks of their true intentions and plans and so nothing these people said could be taken at face value because they must be just lying and deceitful.

We have today in the West, not only this classical language, but we also have in a sense a new Orientalist language which has taken Edward Said’s analysis and criticisms about Western language and the ‘other’ to new heights (Said 1978). We have a language which was summed up by Ehud Barak, then defence Minister of Israel, when he described Israel as a ‘villa in the jungle’, a villa of civilization. This villa was set down in the jungle and at the villa walls, just at the edge of the cultivated garden, you could see the tentacles, the roots, the creepers and stalks of the jungle encroaching closer and closer on that civilization. Of course the tentacles of the jungle are Gaza and Hamas. They are, in a sense, beyond civilization in the language of the new Orientalism; we simply have put them beyond the scope of civilization and not only beyond the scope of civilization but also beyond the scope of international law. When Hamas or parliamentarians from the uncivilized people beyond the villa walls are elected to parliament, they are not part of us. They are not part of the civilized world: they lie beyond it, these barbarians. It is no longer necessary for us to treat elected parliamentarians as we would within the civilized world. In fact, approximately 40 Hamas parliamentarians remain in prison even today. And violence by nation states becomes nothing more than the legitimate response of civilization. What these barbarians are practising is not resistance; they are not fighting oppression. They have, as our leaders describe it, false grievances (as Mr Blair called it, in The last days of Tony Blair 2007). Muslims have false grievances against the West and worse, they have become ‘extremists’.

So when the woman in a conference rather like this stood up and said ‘and you believed Hamas and Hezbollah when they told you they support democracy?’—well, clearly, in her view, Hezbollah and Hamas are simply lying. The West has a presumption of deceit and that presumption erodes the content and the face value of anything these movements can say. Conservatives in the West, and in America particularly, go a little further and say that you do not even have to listen and understand because you know that this is simply totalitarianism, and under this totalitarianism is an attempt to destroy our open and cosmopolitan society—just as the totalitarians succeeded in destroying the open and tolerant society of the Weimar republic. The West, in essence, has an approach to Islamism which has emptied language of any meaning, of any real content.

This happens not only with Hamas and Hezbollah. You see exactly the same process taking place elsewhere. In Iraq you will see, for example, the Western press refer to the statements of Muqtada al-Sadr and others and they comment, ‘Well of course this is what they say, but in reality this is not what they mean. When Muqtada al-Sadr talks about Arab nationalism or Arab ties or community connections within Iraq, he doesn’t mean what he says. The Western press describes this simply as a struggle for power and at the root of this struggle is religion.’ Statements such as those by Muqtada al-Sadr are erased of content and meaning because when they say things, they don’t really mean what they say because we understand their true nature and understand that it is simply a struggle for power.
Essentially, language is a tool of power which is being used very deliberately in the West to erode the meaning of people’s identity. It is language that is intended to make Islamists superficial, to make the whole identity of Islamism unattractive and repellent to moderates in the West, to turn people against it. It is essentially trying to crush alternative movements and alternative centres of power, to prevent new power from arising to challenge the West in this region, whether in Iraq, Palestine or Lebanon. This emptying of identity and language of meaning is a reflection of how the West uses and conceives of its power. A number of political philosophers in the West are quite clear that they believe that liberals are queasy about power itself, that power frightens liberals and they don’t really have the steel to crush alternatives to our power. They believe that there are those in the West who have an unduly optimistic view about compromise and mediation and that somehow this attempt to understand the ‘other’ is appeasement. It is the conservatives’ dismissal of these humanistic views that is a matter for moral philosophers, but politicians understand that power and the role of power is to destroy rival contenders in the use of power.

So in this sense of the unmeaning of language, where the West has been involved in destroying the substance and the content of language, what should be the Islamists’ response? Clearly it is simply neither appropriate nor possible to answer in the language of mediation. When language is not being used for communication or to comprehend or to mediate, it is being used here to erode and undermine identity. This is not an appropriate use of language.

In a sense, this underlies the reason why we face resistance—because in one way, resistance can be a way to facilitate dialogue. I want to come back to what is the core of this problem because we are not talking about a simple misunderstanding in the West; it is not the case, for example, that if you or I were to sit down with Dick Cheney and say that this was how we saw things, he would reply: ‘Well now I really understand.’ That is not going to happen because this is essentially about power—the West retaining power.

The person who understood this and wrote about this most clearly is Frantz Fanon in the 1960s, when he wrote, particularly from his own experience of working in colonial Algeria, about the feelings of inadequacy and dependency experienced by the negro. Fanon describes in powerful terms the impact of language and power on a colonized people:

Every colonised people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural creativity ultimately finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon 1982, p. 18)

Fanon suggests that behind the anguish of those written off as backward lies a deep anger, at Western indifference: ‘this automatic manner of classifying him and de-civilising him’, he suggests, ‘imposes discrimination, robs him of individuality and tells him that he must bring himself into step with the superior modern world…These pressures may ultimately lead to the collapse of ego. The goal of his behaviour will become fixated on the ‘other’ [in the guise of the white man], for the ‘other’ alone can give him his worth and self esteem (Fanon 1982, p. 32). For some, at the climax of their anguish, there remains only one solution for the miserable [colonial]. Fanon suggests that is to be overwhelmed by a desire to furnish proof of his whiteness
[modernity] to others and above all to himself. He argues that he should ‘no longer be confronted by the dilemma to turn white [modern] or to disappear’ (Fanon 1986, p. 32).

The alternative for this mindset of passive acceptance for Fanon was clear: those affected must abandon their hallucinatory search after whiteness [Western modernity] and act for change [pursue resistance] in order to compel the ‘white man’ to acknowledge that I, a negro/Muslim, am human.

The desire to place the human being back at the centre of society, to acknowledge Muslims as humans with rights and values, and to end the demonization of Muslims is exactly the same agenda as that of most mainstream Islamist movements. Islamists are putting forward the virtues and historic needs of the human being as the essence of what they are trying to do. It is also the echo of the civil rights movement and is still the echo when you meet Muslims in Leicester and Bradford in the UK today when they come and say, ‘I would like some respect—give me some respect and dignity.’

In a sense, what I am suggesting is resistance. We should not be surprised when we are faced with armed resistance which is essentially the result of emptying our language of any meaning and substance. This is only to be expected if we treat language in this way. It is a paradox that the West should do this because it is, of course, a crushing of alternative thinking and alternative values which completely contradicts our claim to reflect enlightenment values. Enlightenment values were a sense of moving toward critical thinking and rationality, which I describe as a form of *ijtihād* for the Christian caliphate which ended with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The Enlightenment was an attempt to think critically about the West and move away from old thinking but, as we see, the present refusal to listen and the attempt to crush alternative thinking is a weakness. It is in fact Osama bin Laden (2002) who has pointed out most forcefully that the need to crush alternative thinking implies a sense of vacuity at the centre of Western life. It also, of course, promotes conflict because it eliminates the possibility of using language as a means of trying to resolve conflict by making it no longer a tool for understanding, and instead making it a tool of power to undermine, weaken and destroy your enemies.

Michel Foucault, who visited and thought about the Iranian revolution, suggested that what is necessary is for the West to begin a critique and questioning of the present limits to Western thinking (Keating 1997). He described the present situation as one of petrified thinking that the West needed to step beyond. He argued for the need to understand how Western thinking has become trapped by its own narrative and by its inability to accept other thinking, and that it was going to be necessary to go beyond these limits before it would be possible for the West to grow and develop. It was not an effort simply to criticize the West in order to be contrary and for the sake of criticism alone: the aim was to try to provide the stimulus for a society that had become passive and paralysed and was no longer able to engage in intellectual and critical thinking and was frightened of ideas coming from elsewhere. The only way the West can move on is to step beyond the limits of this thinking. The insights of the Islamists can, in fact, help the West in this process of moving beyond Western petrified thinking.

The clearest example of this was perhaps in South Africa. There was, of course, in South Africa a resistance, the African National Congress. Despite this resistance, there was no change in the thinking of the white elite who ignored it as best they
could. What really brought about the change was when firms and business men, such as Anglo–American and Oppenheimer, began to question the limits of South African thinking and the idea that special rights for white men in South Africa was either desirable or sustainable as a programme for the future of that country (Fieldhouse 2004). These businessmen eventually linked up with activists and other movements so there was in a sense an internal resistance critiquing the elite in South Africa. It was, in essence, this latter internal resistance—people who were ready to think and critique the language of the elite and its insistence on special rights for white people—that managed to allow South Africa to step beyond those limits and to move to a new situation. This is what is meant by the need for an internal critique and this is probably what Foucault had in mind when he talked about the necessity when societies get stuck, as South Africans were stuck in their discourse of special rights for white men, to look to the insights of others about how they see and understand our society. How they moved on was simply the internal critique coupled with the resistance that was taking place from within the borders of South Africa.

Only in this way will the ideas about Islamism and what it says about the West become clear. Only then will it be possible to hear what Islamists are really saying, not just in terms of language and slogans, but in terms of the actual meaning of what they are saying. Only by the West stepping beyond the limits of its present thinking will real dialogue become possible, because only then will it be possible to hear some of the things which are being said and understand how they relate to all of us, both in the West and in the Muslim world.

In a sense, this is the paradox of the current situation: that you need to refuse dialogue to get dialogue. Only by the refusal of dialogue, which the Islamists are offering by saying, ‘No, we’re not willing to engage on the terms set by the West; we’re only prepared to sit down and talk on different terms’, will real dialogue become possible. In other words, they are saying, ‘We want to change the rules of the game, and not simply accept your rules.’ Only when the West understands the need to listen to these insights on their own terms will we see a dialogue that has any real meaning. The Islamists do have ideas, they do have an ideology which has a potential to sever stale relationships in societies and stale ideas between people and societies. They have a category of rationality which Muslims find both energizing and mobilizing, as one can see from the excitement and energy found in Gaza or south Lebanon—the excitement of young people who work with Hamas who are stimulated by these fresh ideas.

For the West, Islamist discourse is a discontinuity in the Western narrative that does not fit neatly in our view of history. When something sudden comes up, like the Iranian revolution, we regard it as an aberration with little real meaning to us because we are on a different track of narrative and therefore it can be safely ignored. The West sees nothing more important for itself than what has been called its ‘cult of the individual’. Nothing is more important than the primacy and freedom of individuality. Individualism is the basic entity around which social processes, fears, passion and reason and propensities for good and evil all circulate.

Islamists are saying that Western thinking in this fashion is flawed: these wants and needs of man that we are all so familiar with and that get catered to so well in the West are actually diminishing man himself. They diminish him and the single-minded pursuit of these needs diminishes others. Individuals become simply a means
to an end, be it the satisfaction of our individual economic, social or sexual needs. Elevation of this personal and material welfare of the individual objectifies the human being and is, in a sense, a result of trying to put the individual before others in our contact with the outside world. Islamists argue too about the need to re-establish ideas that go beyond need and wants, that are multi-dimensional, that return the human being not simply to this narrow category of the rational economic actor seeking simply to maximize his or her economic and material welfare, but looks at him/her in a multi-faceted way and puts him/her back at the centre of society again.

Muslims also are increasingly recognizing that Western modernity in the sense described above has exhausted its resources. Western secular life is no longer the future that beckons but will become archaic and a vision redolent of colonialism and the domination of the past to which Westerners have fallen victim. They also believe that the pervasive power relationships that exist within Western societies, both in government and in business, limit rather than increase an individual’s well being. They hold, and they believe, that these relationships isolate people from one another. This sense of isolation, of moral loneliness, creates a sense of illusory freedom and anxiety experienced by so many people in the West.

These are some of the things that Islamists are saying and, as you notice, all of them are rooted in the common human experience. None of these concepts can be described as particularly theological issues. In short, Islamists are offering a fundamental disagreement, a disagreement to our narrative of history and our meaning of modernity. They do not accept the idea that the whole of history is portrayed as a continuous spectrum from backwardness to modern Western secular life and they do not accept that the West is the most advanced form of society, at the extreme of the spectrum from backwardness to advanced-ness. Nor do they accept that this model is the only appropriate or available model for others. They do not accept that those who offer them a vision of a different future are, by Western definition, either culturally unable or too resistant to be able to attain modernity. They do not accept the power relationships of the West that exist within our societies or between our societies. They do not accept that the success and advance of the individual is the litmus test of advance in society versus their view that it is actually the cohesiveness of society and community which should be the test of progress. Islamists view progress in terms of progress towards community cohesion and not simply the progress of an individual.

They also question our understanding of individualism and what it means in terms of freedom. Does individualism really mean freedom? This is a question that is being widely asked by many Muslims: they query the Western claim to the universality of its rationality based on its foundations in empiricism and scientific methodology. They do not accept that this basis for Western rationality is somehow more objective and therefore superior to other forms of rationality. They hold that the West, by confining itself to a narrow, ostensibly objective form of thinking, has excluded deductive, syllogistic and metaphysical thinking. Islamists would say that the West believes this to be the essence of rationality; they think that it is objective. But Muslims see it as just as laden with value-judgements as any other basis of thinking and that by resting its rationality on only one basis of critical thinking—empiricism—it has lost the capability of seeing issues in the round. They therefore reject claims for the universality of Western thinking or values (Interview by the
We may or may not agree with the Islamists on these points. We may see contradictions and divergences in Islamist discourse and a short article like this must obviously be restricted to generalities. But the point is that surely Islamists are saying something. It is not just the ‘babble of barbarians’, of uncivilized people whose language does not have any substance or meaning, so that we do not have to listen.

Before rushing to the defence of the West and its thinking, it is important to note that Islamists are not saying that empirical thinking is wrong. They are simply saying that it is only one component of rational thinking. When the West diverged from the tradition it had shared jointly with Islam of philosophy and having different forms of rationality, and chose empiricism alone, we actually diminished human beings; individuals became objectified and we have objectified many people and our planet in the way we treat them because of this fashion of thinking. Islamists are not dismissing Western thinking: there are probably many more people reading Hegel, Habermas and Foucault in Tehran than in Oxford or Cambridge. Islamists recognize that some thinkers in the West stand above this conflict and that their thinking is relevant to all mankind.

The conflict we see, and which seems from events that we are experiencing to be becoming worse, is not suitable for resolution through well-meaning mediation by well meaning people coming from Europe or the United States to speak to the ‘other’ just because it is clearly important that this should happen. It does happen, but it is not going to tackle the issue of power and the way the West fails to hear or listen to what others are saying to it. Nor will it lead to an escape from the vacuous ‘peace process industry’, the industry we see in Palestine, in the Palestinian–Israeli process, with many people and organizations living off the grants and aid for promoting talking between people. A solution will not become possible unless encounters deal with meaning and actually hearing what people are saying, and not simply with process for process’ sake.

In short, if we want to have a serious peace process, it is necessary for us, the West, to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are saying and thinking and doing and be more realistic about what we have become. Is the only answer to the challenge of Iran and the Iranian revolution, within the present Western limits of thinking, to bomb it? Is this what we have come to? Do we not have to see and think about whether this is the limit of what we have become? Moving beyond these limits also requires listening to some of the insights that others have.

Muslim thinkers and philosophers are presenting a serious and substantial critique of Western thinking and society. It is not a critique of the Enlightenment per se, but of what we have made of the Enlightenment in terms of its power relationships and the concentration of power within Western societies. They see this as being far from the original Enlightenment model, which has now become the myth that somehow we in the West all live in a society which is encouraging creative new dynamic thinking. We all know this is not true. Many in the West find it difficult to hear the ideas that are coming out of this part of the world and when they do they say, ‘And you believe them? And you listen to this nonsense, this babble?’

The ability to actually think and look critically at ourselves is probably the missing element in this political process of talking. We do need, if we want to move
away from this conflict, to escape from our current conditioned thinking, what Foucault (1984) described as the ‘blackmail of the narrative of history’, and from our narrative of the enlightenment, which is possibly not as real as it was when the Enlightenment started.

We need to challenge our acquiescence to Western language and norms which we all submit to. Experience of the European Union shows that there are things it is just not possible to say in the West anymore. You notice the silences in the Annapolis process; what word about the siege on Gaza or Hamas? Does anyone remember hearing about this? Saying these things in Western diplomatic circles has become unacceptable. Someone at a Washington DC think-tank discussion in 2007 raised a question about Hamas and everyone said, ‘We simply cannot discuss that here, not in this meeting; it’s not acceptable.’ Is this what we mean when we talk about living in the age of the Enlightenment?

In a sense, I am saying that what is needed is a resistance in the West; a resistance from within, along the South African model, from business men and critical thinkers who can see, who look at what is happening in Iran, in this region, and say: ‘Have we got this right? Do you think we ought to be rethinking this? Have we reached the limits of our thinking? Maybe we ought to step beyond “special rights for white men” in the Middle East and think afresh.’

We need to think afresh, to go back to some of the foundations of Western culture, not simply to diminish or criticize them, but because this is the means by which we can step beyond our present impasse. Unless there is an internal critique of what is happening, we shall remain stuck. We may proceed by bombing Iran and possibly killing another two hundred thousand people, and we shall be asking ourselves, is this really what we want to do? Is this a moral thing to do? But that will not change the situation.

Unless there is this questioning and awakening in the West—and the word ‘awakening’ is used deliberately—the West will remain unchanged. This is also the view of many Islamist thinkers—that the West will remain unchanged and that talking is pointless and so conflict will continue. We will have no real dialogue and will have only process with no real meaning, a process of un-meaning rather than meaning.

To return to the title of this article, talking, therefore, is not overdue. Sadly, at this stage, the West cannot hear. Talking at this stage is premature; the only answer is to continue the paradox of refusal to talk in the hope that this will provoke people to think about how, at some point, they can step past the limits of a mindset that is opposed to listening to others.

**Notes**

1. This is an edited version of the Bill and Sally Hambrecht Distinguished Peacemakers Lecture, delivered at The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, Beirut, 17 January 2008.

2. ‘This premise, that we are surrounded by a chaotic jungle, is not new, and the conclusions deriving from it have also been exhausted: We armed ourselves with machetes and tried to tame the creatures of the forest, we tried to deforest swaths of territory until we reached the Suez Canal and the Jordan River, we tried to understand the laws of the jungle, and we gave up. Afterward, when the jungle grew beneath our feet and clutched at us with its roots, we unilaterally withdrew to the yard of the villa and tried to surround it with a mighty wall.'
Without proper upkeep, day in and day out, the stalks of chaos might also sprout up from under the floor and into the living room (Rosenblum, 2007).

References

The last days of Tony Blair, Channel Four TV documentary, 2 July 2007.