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Islam Through the Looking Glass

J.B. Kelly

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Islam Through the Looking Glass

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"I can't believe that!" said Alice. "Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. ". . .Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass

We are fated, as the old Chinese chestnut has it, to live in interesting times, and never more so than in the last eighteen months which have been witness to one of the most resounding collapses of foreign policy to have occurred in modern history. Almost the whole of the strategy pursued by the Western powers in the Middle East since the end of the Second World War lies about us in ruins, leaving our vital economic and political interests in the region virtually defenseless—and this at a time when they are more gravely menaced than ever before. Obviously the causes of this dismal collapse are manifold: even to begin to delineate them would require a treatise of formidable length, a treatise which, of necessity, would have to concern itself as much with what has happened to the Western world over the past thirty-odd years as it would with the course of events in the Middle East in that period. All that we can do here is to look at one of the major causes of this disastrous failure in foreign policy, *viz.* the misconceptions which have prevailed in the West about the nature of Islamic society and government in the Middle East.

For more than a generation now we have been told by those in government, the media and the academies who consider it their place to instruct and enlighten us about the world's affairs that we have nothing to fear from Islam, least of all any deep-rooted animosity against the West. If there have been occasional displays of anti-Western or anti-Christian sentiment, these are to be ascribed either to the justifiable resentment felt by the peoples of the Middle East at past oppression and exploitation by the powers of Europe or to the intolerable affront to Muslim sensibilities afforded by the creation of the state of Israel. The possibility that the actions of Islamic governments and peoples might be inspired by hostility to Christendom was derided by our mentors. Such notions, they assured us (barely able to smother their giggles) belonged to the days of the British raj in India, to the Sepoy Mutiny and the Afghan Wars, to the Mahdist

uprising in the Sudan and the exploits of the Mad Mullah in Somaliland—in fact, to that whole vanished Kiplingesque world of dark conspiracies in the labyrinthine depths of Muslim cities, of the secret preaching of *jihad* in remote villages, and of fanatical tribesmen pouring over the Residency walls, jezail in hand, and a crying of "Din! Din! Din!" on their lips. The contemporary Muslim world, we were assured, was altogether a different place, which every day drew closer to the West as it rapidly absorbed Western technology, Western culture, Western standards and Western values. As for Islam, were not its roots entwined with those of Judaism and Christianity, did not its adherents worship the one (and perhaps the same?) God, was it not inspired by the same egalitarian and libertarian ideas as those disseminated by the French Revolution and propounded by the Founding Fathers?

Far from posing a threat to the West, so the conventional wisdom had it, Islam actually served to diminish the likelihood of eventual Soviet domination of the Middle East. The incompatibility of Islamic doctrines with Marxist dogma virtually ensured that Iran and the Arab states would never voluntarily ally themselves with the Soviet Union against the Western powers. If some Arab states have contracted political, economic or military relations with the Soviet Union, it is only because of the intransigence of Israel in refusing to concede the just demands of the Arab states for the restitution of occupied Arab lands and the restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people. Since Israel has been sustained consistently in her obdurate stand by the United States, the Arabs have had no choice but to enlist the countervailing support of the Soviet Union.

Such, here necessarily compressed (and only slightly exaggerated), are some of the principal tenets of the orthodox canon concerning Islam and its relations with the West. It is almost needless to say that they bear little resemblance to the actual conduct of the Muslim states of the Middle East (Turkey apart) over the past quarter of a century and more. Algeria, Libya, Syria, Iraq, North Yemen, South Yemen, Kuwait, Egypt, and the Sudan have all at various times entered into compacts of one kind or another with the Soviet Union. South Yemen, now under a Marxist dictatorship, has for all intents and purposes, become a Soviet colony. Libya, Syria, and Iraq all afford the Russians military facilities on their soil, and the last two are

linked to the Soviet Union by defensive treaties.

That the Soviet Union, like imperial Russia before it, was destined to become a power in the Middle East cannot be gainsaid. But it is equally true to say that the Russians have entered the Middle East during the past twenty-five years at Arab invitation. It is not enough to ascribe the invitation, or the subsequent consortings of the Arab states with the Soviet Union, to the anger and indignation aroused in them by the continued existence of Israel. If Israel had never been born, some pretext or other would have been found by the Arabs to bring the Soviet Union into the Middle East. For the enmity felt by the Muslim Arab world for the Christian West is such that it was bound eventually to cause the Arab maxim of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" to operate to embrace the West's most powerful and malevolent foe.

It is much the same with the Iranian Shia. Fear of the Soviet Union failed to inhibit the upsurge of anti-Western and Shia fundamentalist sentiment in Iran in 1978-79, despite the long record of Russian aggression against that country. That upsurge and its aftermath also exposed the irrelevance of the belief in the incompatibility of Islam and Marxism with which the West has been wont to comfort itself. The achievement of some kind of philosophical synthesis between Marxism and Islam is not an essential prelude to the cooperation of radical political groups to effect revolutionary change and along with it the destruction of Western interests in the Middle East. (The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen stands as grim testimony to the truth of this assertion.) The emotions and expectations aroused in the Arab and Iranian masses by the preachings of militant Muslim divines are much the same as those stimulated by the propaganda of Marxists. Both open up to the masses prospects of material plenty and earthly happiness. Both are directed against the West, which is seen as the source of trouble and oppression, and against "imperialism," which is equated with capitalism, the economic basis of Western society. These various strains, as Elie Kedourie has so cogently demonstrated,[1] are evident in the pronouncements of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and especially in his railing

1. "Islamic Revolution," *Salisbury Papers No. 6*, London, 1979; and "Khomeini's Political Heresy," *Policy Review*, Spring 1980.

against the West for its debauchery, its materialism and its corrupting effects upon Muslim society. It is almost immaterial whether the Muslim or the Marxist component is uppermost in Khomeini's thought. What matters is the animosity which he and his counterparts in Sunni Islam (like the Libyan dictator, Colonel Qaddafi) evince against Christendom and the West; and it is this very animosity which serves to reconcile Muslim extremist with Marxist revolutionary.

Oil Supplies and Prices

If anything exposes as a sham the alleged mutuality of interests between Islam and the West in opposing the advance of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, it is the behavior of the Arab oil-producing states and Iran since 1970 over oil supplies and prices. According to the doctrine of common interest, the Arabs and Persians will be deterred from demanding too high a price for their oil by the knowledge that if they weaken the West economically they will impair its ability to defend them against the Russians. The record, it need hardly be said, shows otherwise. In 1970 Colonel Qaddafi forced an upward revision of prices by compelling the oil companies operating in Libya to cut production and by threatening them with nationalization. At the outset of 1971 the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, under the leadership of Shah Muhammad Reza, obtained a further increase in prices by threatening an oil embargo if its demands were not satisfied. To augment their income from oil production still further the OPEC governments embarked in 1972 (through the device known as "participation") upon the compulsory acquisition of a share in the equity and assets of the oil companies operating in their territories. Despite the fact that the agreement reached by OPEC with the companies at Tehran at the outset of 1971 was supposed to run for five years, OPEC tore up the agreement in the summer of 1973. Thereafter it ceased even to go through the motions of negotiating prices with the companies: instead it laid them down by fiat. In October 1973 OPEC virtually doubled the existing price of oil, and two months later doubled it again. During this interval the Arab members of OPEC used the pretext of the Yom Kippur War to reduce oil production and place an embargo upon the export of

oil to the United States and certain other Western countries, one of the chief purposes of which was to force the Western industrial world and Japan to acquiesce in the huge increases in oil prices.

"Participation" proved too slow a means for the Arabs and Iranians to acquire a controlling share in the oil companies' operations in their territories. Although they had signed agreements providing for their attainment of a 51 percent interest in the companies by 1982, they proceeded to ignore these agreements and to nationalize the companies outright in the mid-1970s. (The trail had been blazed for them by Colonel Qaddafi's expropriation of British Petroleum in Libya at the end of 1971, by Iraq's nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company in June 1972, and by the Shah's revocation of the Iranian oil consortium's concession early in 1973.) By 1978 the price of the "marker crude" (standard Arabian light) had risen to $13.66 a barrel, nearly ten times what it had been in 1970, while the prices of Libyan, Algerian and Nigerian crude were substantially higher. OPEC's revenues, which had been less than $86,000 million in 1970, were in the vicinity of $140,000 million in 1978. Still the Arabs and Iranians were not satisfied. Nor did the former seem to be deterred from their constant pursuit of ever-mounting oil revenues by what was happening around them in Ethiopia, South Yemen, Iran, and Afghanistan. The twelve months from December 1978 to December 1979 witnessed the greatest upheavals which had taken place in the Middle East since the Second World War, beginning with the fall of the Shah and ending with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Yet those same twelve months also saw the most spectacular rises in the price of Middle-Eastern oil that had ever occurred in the history of the oil industry. All pretense by OPEC of regulating the price of oil sold by its member states was thrown to the winds. A frantic free-for-all developed as Iran and the Arab oil states tried to outdo one another in the outrageousness and arbitrariness of their price increases. Before 1979 was out, the Gulf marker crude had doubled in price to $26 a barrel (over 17 times what it had been ten years earlier), while Libyan, Algerian, and other light crudes were priced at around $35 a barrel.

So much, then, for the oft-repeated assurances of our latter-day Panglosses that the Arabs and Iranians will moderate their conduct over oil prices by a sober appreciation of the need not

to impair the West's economic strength and hence its capacity to defend the Middle East against the Soviet Union. Two days after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, it might be noted, Kuwait raised the price of its oil by a further $2 a barrel. Kuwait's aggressive policy over oil, which has not been accorded in the Western press the attention it deserves, is not confined to her persistent advocacy of frequent oil-price rises. Next to Libya, Kuwait has been the most strident proponent of "conservation" (i.e. arbitrary reductions in output) as a means of keeping both demand and prices buoyant. Kuwait vehemently opposed the setting up of the International Energy Agency, and it has continued ever since to condemn the stockpiling of oil by the Western industrial nations and Japan for the very reason that they have resorted to it, *viz.* to reduce their vulnerability to blackmail by the Arab oil states.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia

A similar malignity towards the West's stockpiling of oil is exhibited by Saudi Arabia, the particular target of its displeasure being the United States' national strategic petroleum reserve. By the terms of the agreement on economic and military cooperation concluded between the United States and Saudi Arabia in 1974, the United States more or less undertook to guarantee the integrity and independence of Saudi Arabia under its present rulers. In return, the House of Saud pledged itself to furnish the United States with a steady and uninterrupted supply of oil, to maintain oil prices at a constant level, and to invest the bulk of its surplus earnings in the United States. Saudi oil production was to reach 10,500,000 barrels a day by January 1, 1978, and any excess over 8,500,000 b/d was to be placed at the disposal of the United States for addition to the national strategic petroleum reserve. It need hardly be remarked that the Saudis have failed to fulfill their side of the bargain, except perhaps in the matter of depositing their surplus funds in the United States. Not only has Saudi Arabia's oil output failed to rise above 9,500,000 b/d, but a substantial part of it has been siphoned off in recent months for sale on the "spot" market at prices well above $26 a barrel. The principal participants in these transactions are reported to be not

unconnected with the ruling house itself.

All these dubious activities—and others of a similar kind (like Saudi Arabia's tacit acceptance of Soviet aircraft bound to and from Aden flying over her territory) which there is not space to record here—have been taking place at a time when the Gulf region has been thrown into greater turmoil than it has known for a generation, and when the Soviet Union has expanded and consolidated its grip upon the perimeter of the region more decisively and ruthlessly than ever before.

That Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other oil-producing states of the Gulf should have conducted themselves over the past eighteen months in the manner that they have is highly revelatory of their sense of proportion, their scale of values and their true attitudes to the West. Nevertheless the Western democracies—or at least their governments—have persisted, through thick and thin, insult and deceit, in proclaiming their faith in the rationality of the regimes in power in the Gulf states. The West's capacity for self-delusion, like its willingness to acquiesce in whatever oil-price rises the magnates of OPEC care to impose upon it, is apparently boundless. Even as these words are being penned the Western nations are bracing themselves to absorb, with what will doubtless be nothing more than perfunctory and feeble protests, yet further rises when OPEC forgathers at Baghdad in November.

What the conduct of the Arab oil-producing states over the past decade has demonstrated beyond the slightest particle of doubt is that their actions are motivated far more by rapacity and by rancor toward the West than they are by fear of the Soviet Union. That this should be so is not really an occasion for surprise. Up to the middle years of this century the Arabs knew nothing of the Russians, least of all at first hand. They realized that Russia existed, somewhere vaguely to the north, beyond Turkey and Iran. But the Russians always remained over the horizon, invisible to Arab eyes, until they made their appearance in the mid-1950s in the capacity of suppliers of arms to Nasser's Egypt. With the West it was different. The West had been present in the Middle East in one form or another since long before the advent of Islam. Thereafter the role it played in the area was more often than not that of an adversary of Islam. The memory of the Crusades dies hard: so the West, which is equated in the Arab mind with Christendom, has

remained a familiar and tangible enemy, one which has never ceased, at least in popular mythology, to oppress and exploit the Arab peoples.

Racked thus by powerful sentiments of grievance and resentment against the West, the Arabs see the oil weapons as a gift sent by God to redress the balance between Christendom and Islam. It enables them to act as though the might and grandeur of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates has been restored, to lay the Christian West under tribute to the Muslim East, and to fulfill the destiny which God in his infinite wisdom has ordained for those to whom He has chosen to reveal the one truth faith. Extravagant though these fancies may appear to Western eyes, they are very real to those who entertain them, and infinitely more appealing than the calmer dictates of reason.

Convictions and emotions of a comparable kind also agitate the Iranian Shia. They are reinforced, in their case, by the promptings of that attribute of the Iranian character which has been unfailingly remarked by Western students of Iran over the centuries—excessive vanity. Shah Muhammad Reza, before his fall, was the very embodiment of this particular national characteristic. He constantly harangued the West for its decadence, drawing unflattering comparisons between what he saw as its unremitting slide into impotence and the vigor with which Iran under his leadership was striding toward the millennium. As Iran's emergence as a great power upon the world's stage was to be accomplished, in his scheme of things, by mulcting the West of its treasure, it is hardly surprising that his was always the loudest voice in OPEC clamoring for higher and yet higher oil prices. His ambivalence toward the West bordered upon schizophrenia. While he was infatuated with Western technology and with his own dreams of transforming Iran within the space of two or three decades into a mighty industrial state, he almost pathologically resented his reliance upon Western support to preserve Iran's independence against the Soviet Union. He had never, so he was in the habit of impressing upon every Westerner to whom he granted an audience, forgotten or forgiven the humiliation he had suffered over the deposition of his father, Reza Shah, by the British in 1941, when British and Russian troops had occupied Iran. That the Russians were equally responsible for Reza Shah's precipitate abdication was something he preferred not to allude to, at least in public.

The Shah's aversion to acknowledging that his country owed its continued existence as an independent state to British support up to the Second World War and to American support since then was fully shared by the Iranian ruling classes. It is almost superfluous to say that it is likewise shared by the new rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that the determining factor in both cases is Iranian vanity. The uncomfortable awareness that the Soviet Union may be deterred (to the extent that it *is* actually deterred, which is problematical) from prosecuting its designs upon Iran by uncertainty about what the Western powers' reaction might be does not sit well with the Ayatollah Khomeini and his henchmen. In truth, it may be this very awareness which impels them to their almost demented heaping of obloquy upon the United States, a luxury which, it might be added, they would probably not have revelled in so wantonly if they did not know from past experience that they could indulge themselves with impunity. What other passions or obsessions may have moved the Iranians to treat with such gross contumely the only power in the world capable of shielding them from the baleful intentions of that other power which has consistently intimidated them for the past two centuries it is beyond the capacity of Western minds to descry or comprehend with any certainty. Even to begin to speculate about the forces which have shaped the Iranian national psychosis is to venture into realms of psycho-pathology unknown to rational men. Suffice it to say that the Iranians would never have dared to bait the Soviet Union in the same fashion—which brings us back to the central theme of our argument, *viz.* that the hatred which the Iranians, like the Arabs, feel for the West greatly outweighs the fears they may entertain about the Soviet Union.

Peace in Proportion to Slaughter

Afghanistan, a Muslim country, has been invaded and occupied by the Russians, who are suppressing the Afghans' resistance with a ruthlessness that is reminiscent of the methods employed a century ago by General Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobolev, one of the Russian conquerors of Central Asia. "I hold it as a principle," Skobolev wrote in 1881 after the massacre of the Turkomans at Geok Tepe, "that in Asia the duration of peace is

in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them the longer they will be quiet afterwards. My system is this: to strike hard, and keep on hitting until resistance is completely over; then at once to form ranks, cease slaughter, and be kind and humane to the prostrate enemy." One might be forgiven for assuming that the brutal subjection today of a Muslim state by an infidel and atheistic power would have set the air waves over the Middle East pulsating with blood-curdling denunciations of the Soviet Union, that the *jihad* would have been preached from every mosque from Rabat to Islamabad, and that a grand alliance of the major and minor Muslim states for the liberation of Afghanistan would by now have been formed. The least one might reasonably have expected is that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Libya would individually or in concert be devising means to help their Sunni co-religionists to fight back against their conquerors, and that the last three states would be seriously reviewing their treaty and other relationships with the Soviet Union.

None of this, of course, has happened. While wounded Afghan guerillas die for want of medical supplies, the rulers of Saudi Arabia fret over the offense caused them by a Western television film, Colonel Qaddafi is directing the assassination of Libyan exiles in the streets of Western cities, and the Baghdad junta is underwriting terrorism in London and elsewhere in pursuit of its vendetta against Khomeini's Iran and Shiism in general. (There is perhaps more reason, though little sense of self-preservation, in Khomeini's apparent insouciance over the Afghans' fate; for Afghans and Iranians have been at each other's throats for centuries over race, religion, and territory.) Islam, for all the wordy pronouncements to the contrary, is a very tenuous bond among those who profess its tenets; which leads one to wonder why such satisfaction was expressed in Western capitals earlier this year when the representatives of the Muslim powers met in Islamabad and condemned the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. What else were they expected to do? Approve it? What counts is not words, especially in a part of the world where rhetoric is the common addiction of rulers and ruled alike, but deeds, and the concrete measures taken by the Muslim states of the Middle East to avenge the rape of Afghanistan are so trifling as to be indiscernible to the naked eye.

Meanwhile, although not a single Muslim state in the world is

today being coerced by a Western power in any way, least of all by force of arms or violations of its territory, the cacophony of complaint and vituperation against the West continues to ululate undiminished from Arab and Iranian throats. It is almost matched by the volume of unthinking cant issuing from Western politicians and pundits about the basic community of interest between Muslim and Western nations in opposing the Soviet Union's advance to the Gulf. Nothing, it seems, least of all the unremitting rancor displayed by the Muslim world toward the West, will shake the faith of our political and intellectual leaders in the ultimate rationality of Middle-Eastern governments. A logical corollary of this faith has been the policy pursued over the past decade of entrusting the security of the Gulf, and the protection of the West's strategic and economic interests in the area, to the joint care of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Not even the collapse of the Shah's regime and the transformation of Iran into one vast Bedlam has forced any sweeping revision of this policy. The same voices that assured us for years about the solidity and steadfastness of the Shah's Iran are now extolling the vigor and capacity of the rulers of Saudi Arabia, earnestly counseling the proper display of deference to their sensibilities—and especially their opposition to the stationing of Western military forces anywhere in the Arabian peninsula—so as not to alienate their natural feelings of affinity with the West. Some gullible souls are even turning wistful eyes towards Iraq, prattling the while about the feasibility of winning over to the Western cause the unsavory Baathist junta in Baghdad.

Islam and the West

Surely the time is long overdue for a thorough housecleaning of our conventional assumptions about Islam in its relationship with the West, to rid ourselves in particular of those musty and dangerous illusions about an identity of Muslim and Western interests in opposing the Soviet Union, whose persistence is obscuring both the menace which now confronts us in the Gulf and the urgent necessity to counteract it. It is doubtful whether the magnitude of the shift in the balance of power in the region caused by the Russian occupation of Afghanistan has even now been grasped in the West. Up to the end of 1979 the "Great

Game" in Asia, whether the contestants were Imperial Russia, British India, the Soviet Union, or the United States, had always been played at one or more removes, concealed behind an Afghan, an Iranian or an Arab facade. When the Russians invaded Afghanistan in force they not only broke the rules of the game but threw them out of the window. If the West is ever to restore the balance of power in the Gulf region, however makeshift that restoration may be at first, its response will have to be on a scale commensurate with the Russian initiative. To attempt, as in the past, to use the local Gulf powers as surrogate defenders of the West's interests will, for the reasons set out in the foregoing pages, no longer suffice—if it ever did. Worse than that, it will be seen as a confession of impotence, a failure of nerve, and as such it will be read as an open invitation to the Soviet Union to push its luck to the limit.

Through their vacillation and willful self-delusion over the past decade, the Western nations have left themselves no alternative but to project their military power into the Gulf region. Obviously the risks inherent in a forward policy are very great. How the Soviet Union will react is unforeseeable, although as realists the Russians would probably acknowledge that while control of the Gulf's oil reserve is a highly desirable strategic objective for them, it is not a matter of life and death as it is for Western Europe. An upsurge of Muslim fanaticism against the West may be taken for granted as the response to any Western intervention, though whether it will amount to more than a ritual outpouring of scurrility and the customary carnival of ruffianism it is hard to say. In any case, the reaction can be, and will have to be, endured. For the perils of inaction in the present disturbed condition of affairs in the Gulf region are far more serious than the risks attendant upon resolute action.

What the Russian occupation of Afghanistan may presage (the tortuous explanations based upon the theory of the "turbulent frontier," which the Soviet Union's apologists in the West have been putting forward, may be safely disregarded) is not entirely clear, although a portent may exist in what General Skobolev had to say a hundred years ago about the strategic significance of the Russian conquest of Turkestan. "Our presence in Turkestan in the name of Russian interests can only be justified by precipitating to our own benefit—the solution of the Eastern Question—in other words, to dominate the Bosporus.

Otherwise the Asiatic hide is not worth the tanning, and all our efforts in Turkestan will have been in vain. . . ."

Who knows but that the tanning of the Afghan hide may have been undertaken with the same ultimate goal in view? Or, alternatively, that the object was to dominate in the near future, not the straits at Istanbul but the Straits of Hormuz? There is naught for our comfort in the thought that doubtless even more interesting times lie ahead of us.

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For more than a generation, the public has been assured that the West has little to fear from Islam. This view is based on the supposed mutuality of interests of the West and the Muslim world and on the supposed incompatibility of Islamic doctrine and atheistic Marxist dogma. The conventional wisdom that Islam is a bulwark against Soviet domination of the Middle East bears little resemblance to the actual conduct of Islamic states. The historic enmity felt by the Muslim East for the Christian West is so fundamental that embracing the West's most powerful foe was bound to result on the basis of the Arab maxim, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The Muslim world, we are assured, fears that weakening the economy of the West would weaken the ability of the West to come to its aid against Soviet aggression. The sham of this view is shown by the rapacious and arbitrary policies of OPEC. The twelve months from December 1978 to December 1979 witnessed the greatest upheavals in the Middle East since World War II, yet that same period, which climaxed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, also brought the most spectacular rises in the price of Middle-East oil that have ever occurred.

If the West is ever to restore the balance of power in the Gulf region vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, its response will have to be on a scale commensurate with the Soviet initiative. To attempt, as in the past, to use the local Gulf powers as surrogate defenders of the West's interests will no longer suffice—if it ever did.

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