

Islam is in the Eye of the Beholder: Explaining the Variance in American and European Discourses and Practices towards ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’

Gregorio Bettiza¹ and Christopher Phillips²

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This article compares American and European policy discourses and practices towards ‘Islam’ as a religion and the ‘Muslim world’ as a specific religious-defined category of countries and peoples in world politics. In the European case, we explore the policies of EU institutions as well as two key European countries with important international roles such as the U.K. and France. This comparative analysis reveals that there are multiple and conflicting approaches to ‘Islam’ across the American and European (EU, British, and French) cases. We argue that the variety of approaches observed is rooted in diverse understandings – based on different American, EU, British, and French identities, geopolitics, power resources, and security interests – of what ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslim world’ are.

This article investigates and compares American and European foreign policy discourses and practices towards ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslim world’. To be clear, we do not investigate counter terrorism policies in any particular detail. Nor are we interested in unpacking American and European approaches to specific countries or Islamist movements (whether violent or non violent) within or beyond the Middle East. We are instead interested in policies which have come to be increasingly and explicitly designed to address and target ‘Islam’, as a particular world religion, and the ‘Muslim world’, as a set of countries that cuts across continents and a category of people which transcends national borders identified primarily by their particular religious identity.

In particular this article starts from the premise that following the attacks of 9/11 the American foreign policy establishment has developed a range of policies and institutions organized around the notion that ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslim world’ are

¹ Max Weber Fellow, European University Institute

² Lecturer, Queen Mary University of London

important cultural, political, and geographical categories in international relations. The next section concentrates on illustrating this development. The sections that follow explore whether similar civilizational-based modes of thinking and organizing foreign policy practices, are detectable in Europe. In particular these parts explore and compare whether EU institutions and specific countries with important historical ties and national interests in Muslim majority countries and regions such as France and the U.K., have their own institutionalized approaches towards Islam as a religion and the Muslim world as particular category of countries and peoples.

Our effort is largely analytical rather than normative or policy-prescriptive. In other words our interest lays mainly in unpacking and comparing rhetorical, institutional and policy changes across the transatlantic space. We are less concerned with arguing whether this or that policy is counter-productive in terms of American or European interests or normatively problematic in terms of some sort of ethical and moral standard. We leave these judgments to the interested reader. We are interested in exploring why these differences exist. Our investigation will suggest that any engagement with Islam and the Muslim world by the US, EU or European powers, is framed and tempered by diverse understandings of what 'Islam' and the 'Muslim world' are. At a closer inspection it appears that differences in American and European identities, geopolitics, power resources, and security interests ultimately shape the nature of their approaches as well as Islam's very own character, whether it is something to be engaged with primarily as an external force, an internal dynamic or a mixture of the two.

The American Context

With the end of the Cold War, the policy and intellectual establishment in Washington was left searching for a new paradigm that could explain international relations and guide American foreign policy in a post-Soviet era. While some were proclaiming the virtues of liberal democracy and globalizing markets, the idea that the new international reality was going to be defined by U.S.-Islam relations was becoming increasingly evident among

certain intellectual circles.

Samuel Huntington's famous clash of civilizations thesis, which appeared on the influential pages of *Foreign Affairs*, captured and gave legitimacy to this narrative (1993). The article prominently identified the 'Islamic civilization' as America's new post-Cold War foe. Along with Huntington, Bernard Lewis and Benjamin Barber were portraying from the pages of *The Atlantic* an Islamic world in crisis, unable to modernize, and increasingly oppositional to the West (Barber 1992, Lewis 1992). Adding their voices to this debate were among others John Esposito and John Voll. These however sought to challenge the clash and confrontation narrative emphasizing the possibility of a fruitful dialogue and engagement between America and Muslims. In 1993 Esposito and Voll established a Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. These scholars would insist that Islam was a peaceful religion and Muslims a peaceful people, perfectly compatible with modernity, democracy and American values (Esposito and Voll 1996; Ahmed 2010).

Many of these discussions were not simply centered on the real or perceived emerging threat posed by local or transnational Islamist groups to American interests in the Middle East. They all, in a way or another, came to see what was occurring within the broad cultural categories of Islam and the Muslim world themselves as a vital international issue. Exchanges between those who emphasized a clash and those who underscored the necessity of a dialogue between America and Islam (**see also Fawad**), constituted the intellectual backbone for many of the debates and initiatives that came to dominate U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11. Largely ignored in official rhetoric and initiatives before 2001, the religio-cultural categories of 'Islam' and the 'Muslim world' increasingly became an organizing principle for American foreign policy discourses and practices following Al Qaeda's attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. The Bush administration framed the attacks not simply as an act of violence by a circumscribed, but dangerous, network of terrorists that needed to be dismantled and brought to justice. Influenced partly by Bernard Lewis, who had regular access to Vice President Cheney (Whitaker 2006), and neoconservative intellectuals, who saw Islamists

of all kinds as a new monolithic ideological competitor (Lynch 2008): much of the administration's post-9/11 national security strategy was designed to rectify what seemed to have gone "wrong" (Lewis 2002) within Islam and the Muslim world itself.

Within the larger umbrella of the War on Terror two broad policy frameworks were designed to explicitly target Muslim people and countries. First, what came to be known as Bush's 'freedom agenda': that is an active military, diplomatic and aid campaign to promote liberal values and institutions in Muslim majority nations in the so-called broader Middle East. Influenced in great part by the democratic peace thesis, the Bush administration saw democracy promotion as a potent antidote to the poison of terrorism and extremism within Islam (Dalacoura 2011, pp.3-6).

Making the case for the war against Iraq to the international community during the September 2002 UN meetings, Bush linked the removal of Saddam with ongoing military activities in Afghanistan and diplomatic efforts to promote elections in the Palestinian territories. Iraq was part and parcel of a broader strategy to inspire democratic "reforms throughout the Muslim world" (2002b). "These nations [Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine]", Bush added would, "show by their example that honest government and respect for women and the great Islamic tradition of learning can triumph in the Middle East and beyond" (2002b). A number of programs were rolled out to promote 'greater democracy in the Muslim world' (Haass 2003). Raging from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002 to the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), later renamed the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative in 2004.

The second set of policies explicitly targeted towards Islam went under the name of 'war of ideas': a far-reaching and multimillion dollar public diplomacy and communication strategy designed to target and discredit Islamist ideology by supporting so-called 'moderate' Muslim voices and theology from Indonesia all the way to Morocco, passing through the Gulf. To implement the 'war of ideas' a successive range of Muslim world outreach Policy Coordinating Committees (PCCs) were established within the National Security Council. These PCCs were designed to coordinate activities towards

Muslims, which inevitably would cut across entrenched bureaucratic country and regional siloes within the foreign policy machinery (Johnson, Dale, and Cronin 2005; Amr 2009). A further push to increase and strengthen diplomatic ties between America and Islam came in 2008 when the first-ever U.S. special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was appointed. “The core of his mission”, Bush remarked, “is to explain to the Islamic world that America is a friend – is a friend of freedom, is a friend of peace, that we value religion” (Bush 2008).

Towards the end of the Bush Presidency American national security debates were shot through with endless references to Islam and the Muslim world. A growing number of polls tracked for the first time ever what ‘Muslims’ around the world thought about the U.S. PEW found that the War on Terror was contributing to producing a “great divide” between “Westerners and Muslims” (PEW 2006). Other surveys explained how the Iraqi intervention, the abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Graib, America’s unconditional backing of Israel, its opposition to Hamas’ 2006 electoral victory: were fuelling the perception among “Muslims” that the U.S. sought to “undermine Islam” (World Public Opinion 2007). A famous Gallup poll by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed purported to explain what “a billion Muslims really think” about democracy and the West (Esposito and Mogahed 2007).

Liberal-leaning think tanks and pundits in Washington when critical of the administration’s response to 9/11 – its aggressive and divisive rhetoric and its militarized democratization program – would nevertheless themselves fall back on cultural categories. The Brookings Institute launched in 2004 an annual U.S.-Islamic world forum to encourage relations at a “moment of tension and frustration” when there was a “virtual absence of dialogue between leaders of the United States and the Muslim world”.³ Esposito and Voll’s Georgetown center at Georgetown University was revitalized in 2005 with a \$20 million dollar gift and renamed Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU). Prominent policy-makers such as Madeleine Albright and Dennis Ross were involved in compiling a major report with the self-

³ <http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/islamic-world/us-islamic-world-forums>

explanatory title: “Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World” (Changing Course 2008, 2009). America, some argued, urgently needed to “comprehend Islam, not only for the sake of its ideals (which included religious tolerance) but also for its geopolitical needs and strategy” (Ahmed 2010, p.6).

This was the domestic and international context within which Barack Obama came into the White House. No wonder then, that one of his first priorities became re-booting relations with the apparently ever more real ‘Muslim world’. The newly elected president used his sweeping rhetoric and personal story to reach out to Muslim audiences and address the increasingly sedimented narratives of clashing civilizations. In his inaugural address, Obama would make the first of many explicit, and increasingly high profile, conciliatory gestures: “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect”, he remarked (2009a). The apogee of these rhetorical overtures to Islam came with the June 2009 Cairo speech. Obama explained to an audience that went far beyond the Al-Azhar University where he spoke, that: “I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition” (Obama 2009b).⁴

This new beginning was not just a rhetorical one, but involved also a number of policy changes designed to improve relations with Muslims. On the one hand Obama sought to urgently address contentious political and policy issues such as torture, Guantanamo, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq by promptly signing executive orders, appointing envoys and committing to withdraw American troops from Bagdad. On the other hand, a whole spate of new public diplomacy, economic, scientific and educational activities were launched under the broad organizing framework of

⁴ Especially from Cairo onwards the Obama administration would start to use the term ‘Muslims around the world’ or ‘Muslim communities’ rather than the more commonly used ‘Muslim world’. The difference is subtle, a turn of phrase preferred by Obama to signal the administration’s focus on diverse Muslim peoples rather than a monolithic Muslim bloc. Yet the substance does not change much. The new administration would still work within a framework that sought to address rhetorically and policy-wise a Muslim ‘other’ – whether ‘peoples’, ‘leaders’, ‘communities’, ‘countries’ or ‘world’ remains unchanged.

‘Muslim engagement’ (Lord and Lynch 2010). The intellectual and institutional backbone of this revamped engagement strategy with Islam were: a newly-created position of Special Representative to Muslim Communities within the State Department, the re-appointment (following from Bush-era practices) of a Special Representative to the OIC; a newly-constituted Office for Global Engagement within the NSC, and the inclusion of key advocates for interfaith-dialogue and Muslim engagement such as Dalia Mogahed and Eboo Patel in the President’s newly-created faith-based Advisory Council in the White House.

Overall during the 1990s and particularly following 9/11, Islam and the Muslim world have become for the American foreign policy establishment meaningful political categories in international relations. Opening-up Muslim societies and confronting radicalized Muslims, during the Bush administration, or engaging all Muslims across the world, during the first Obama administration; have become part and parcel of what American Presidents, pundits and policy-makers strategize about and act upon. Given the novelty of targeting a distinctive geographic space and people because of its religious identity, a host of new implicit and explicit ‘Muslim’ offices and appointees have been created to better coordinate and manage policies that cut across established national and regional foreign policy bureaus. Islam and the Muslim world have become not just discursive, but also tangible material realities in terms of structuring American foreign policy institutions and practices. Has a similar process occurred in the case of the EU, France and the U.K.? Have Europe and European countries come to perceive the world modeled around new civilizational categories in need of special attention? Have they developed their own set of Muslim-specific policies comparable to those of the United States? The following sections will seek to give some tentative answers to these questions.

The European Context

EU

The European Union's (EU) engagement with Islam and the Muslim World since the end of the Cold War has been more layered and complex than that of the United States. For one, the relationship between domestic concerns and foreign interaction with the Muslim world is more pronounced. The EU has a considerably larger domestic Muslim population than does the US, 10 million to 2.5 million, and in recent years leaders of the largest European Muslim communities in the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands have been increasingly vocal and active about their states' foreign policy in the Middle East and Muslim World. A second issue is the close proximity of Islamic-majority states to the EU's borders. While Washington's policies are formulated for a distant 'out there' Muslim World, the close proximity of Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East to Europe means the impact of any Islam policy from Brussels could have a more immediate and costly impact, whether in terms of immigration, terrorism or neighbourly relations. A third, related complexity for the EU concerns Europe's identity. Culture wars aside, the US has a relatively settled value-based sense of identity compared to in Europe, where the EU's members continue to debate what being European mean. The contested role of Christianity within this identity gives particular salience to the position of Islam in Europe, particularly given Muslim Turkey's efforts to join the EU. A final complication is structural: the ability for the 27 member EU to form any comprehensive approach on any foreign policy matter, let alone one as complex and debated as a single policy or set of policies to Islam or the Muslim World. While the US' centralised structure as a single sovereign government permits some such approach, any EU policy risks being undermined by individual member states' foreign and domestic policies. That said, despite these complications there has still been a concerted effort by the EU, led largely by the European Commission, to map out a vague set of policies for engaging Islam in the past two decades, primarily focused on the Islamic near abroad.

In the 1990s the desire for the EU to increase its engagement with the Muslim states to its south and east became more pronounced once the East-West dichotomy of the Cold War began to rescind into history. Although EU leaders had sought a common strategy to engage with non-EU Mediterranean states, including North Africa and the

Levant, from as early as 1972 (Tanner 2004), the 1995 launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or Barcelona Process was the real watershed moment (Marechal et al. 2003; Joffe 1999). This complimented the general European intellectual trends of the time that had shown less appetite for Huntington's theories than in the US and sought to promote Europe as a conciliator between the West and the Muslim World (Halliday 1998). The EU sought to promote this conciliatory role more actively in the wake of 9/11 as a contrast to the more confrontational stance taken by the Bush administration.

The Barcelona Process has been at the heart of the EU's approach to the Muslim World, focusing on neighbouring Muslim states. In 1995, the EMP was established between the EU and 12 partner states: Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. These states committed to "strengthen political dialogue," with the EU, via three main initiatives: enhancing the economic relationship; promoting peace and stability; and promoting intercultural dialogue (Silvestri 2005). The initial goals behind the EMP were largely instrumental: promoting economic prosperity, political development and cultural understanding in the EU's southern neighbours would provide new markets for European companies, discourage excessive immigration from neighbouring states into the EU, and secure a stable neighbouring environment. However, while most of these policies had limited only success, the goal of intercultural dialogue has evolved and developed into an end of itself. After 9/11 "dialogue" was particularly vocally advocated by key EU commissioners. Romano Prodi, then Commission President, argued in a speech in 2002 that, "peace and stability are borne out of dialogue," a sentiment he repeatedly echoed when discussing the Muslim world. At the time these sentiments were similarly voiced by Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten, and Commissioner for Culture, Viviane Reading, among others (Silvestri 2005). This was complimented by the adoption for several dialogical initiatives. For example, in 2003 a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to promote dialogue between cultures and civilisations was established while, the following year, the EU Strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East was formally announced. Perhaps one of the Barcelona's greatest successes is that the concept of intercultural dialogue has begun to be explored outside of EU guidance. In

2005 Spain, the initiator of the EMP, with the support of Turkey, proposed the Alliance of Civilisations initiative at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, taking the idea of interfaith and intercultural dialogue to a UN level.

However, the relative successes of the intercultural components of the EMP are perhaps more pronounced when contrasted to the failures of the economic and political elements. As seen by the outbreak of public unrest across the Arab world in 2011, adding serious conflict to Syria and Libya to the instability already seen in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories, a decade and a half after Barcelona, Europe's south is neither economically prosperous, peaceful or democratically governed. Some have highlighted the EMP's own failings on this, noting how policies prioritised trade with dictatorial regimes over pushing for good governance (Pace & Schmacher 2004; Gillespie 2003). Yet the foreign policies of individual member states towards the region have also undermined the MEP's goal of a coordinated approach to Muslim neighbours. The Iraq War of 2003 was one of the most visible dividers of European policy. A pro-war camp led by the United Kingdom and supported by the states divisively labelled 'New Europe' by the Bush administration found itself at odds with 'Old Europe' who opposed war, led by France and Germany. Similarly the Israel-Palestine conflict has long been a source of dispute between EU members. While the EU as an institution has become ever more involved in the peace process (Danreuther 2004) its ability to translate considerable economic influence into tangible political results have been hindered by divisions between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian member states. The inability to present a common front on this conflict was at its most visible in 2011 when the Palestinian Authority sought to gain recognition as a state from the UN General Assembly. Despite failing to win enough support to join the UN itself the Palestinian Authority was granted entry to the United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The 27 EU member states were deeply divided though, even on the relatively un-controversial membership of a cultural organisation, with 11 voting in favour, 11 abstaining and 5 opposing Palestinian membership.

Preferential policies from member states to former colonies have also undermined

common policies, with France and Italy in particular favouring close political and economic ties with regimes in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya ahead of supporting the EMP's agenda on good governance. This has at times been a source of embarrassment to the EU's image in the Muslim World, and added to a perception that member states talk the language of promoting democracy, but ultimately follow their economic interests ahead of the civil rights of their neighbouring populations. This was seen in the early days of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, when France's foreign minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered police "knowhow" to help the dictatorial regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali keep order. The actions of individual actors within member states have also threatened to undo progress on EU-Muslim World relations. The most notable such action was in 2005-6 when a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, printed 12 images of the Prophet Mohammad prompting widespread anti-Danish protests across the Muslim world, soon joined by demonstrations against other European nations when German, French, Belgian, Dutch and various Scandinavian newspapers re-printed the cartoons. With 27 different state agendas existing simultaneously, the difficulty in pursuing any semblance of consistency for EU engagement with the Muslim World can thus be seen, even in the relatively successful area of cultural dialogue.

Alongside multilateral engagement with Muslim states, a further component of the EU's relationship with Islam has been the debate over European identity. For all the talk of 'dialogue' with the Muslim World among Europe's leaders, Turkey's application to join the EU nevertheless prompted a backlash from those insisting that a Muslim country should not be allowed to join 'Christian' Europe. Turkey has been an associate member of the EEC since 1963, at which point the then President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein, perhaps influenced by Cold War thinking and seeing Ankara as a valuable anti-Soviet ally, declared that, "Turkey is part of Europe" (Kerslake et al. 2010). Yet despite persistent interest from Turkey in joining the EU ever since, it has repeatedly been overlooked while other states have been admitted including former enemies in the Eastern bloc. Indeed, Turkey was publically humiliated in 1997 when every applicant country except Turkey was invited to begin negotiations, an insult only partly rectified by permission being eventually granted in 1999 and accession talks begun in 2004. Again,

over the issue of Turkish entry, members have been divided preventing a coherent strategy, with the UK leading the pro-Turkey camp and, recently, France and Austria leading the opposition. While reluctance to accept Turkey into the European family has often been couched in practical opposition, usually focusing on its population size, undeveloped economy and unreformed agricultural sector, concerns over its Islamic identity are often not far from the surface. Former French President Nicholas Sarkozy, for example, publically stated that, despite his admiration for Turkey, he did not see it as part of Europe. Leaked diplomatic cables have subsequently revealed that he opposed the idea of having “70 million Muslims” in Europe. These cultural arguments have been echoed by numerous public figures, such as Dutch former Commissioner Frits Bolkestein, who argued in 2004 that the Islamic character of Turkey’s culture did not allow it to belong to Europe. Austria’s commissioner at the time, Franz Fischler, similarly claimed that Turkey was culturally ‘oriental’ and not European (Silvestri 2005). While the US has long pressured the EU to accept Turkish entry as a means to provide the Muslim world with a role model of a ‘moderate’ Muslim state integrated into the West, this issue has aroused considerable European opposition and division prompting competing definitions of what European identity is.

These identity questions have also filtered down to a popular level with Islam increasingly portrayed as the ‘enemy’. Some scholars have argued that Europe’s transnational Muslim population has helped European integration (Roy 2004), yet at the same time their increased visibility – given the worldwide trend of increasing conservative practices such as headscarf wearing and beard growth – has prompted a backlash from the Right in the wake of 9/11. The headscarf debate in France, complaints over halal school dinners and mosque building in the UK, and the reaction to the assassination by an Islamist extremist of film-maker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands are among a list of incidents and issues that have built on the notion of ‘the enemy within’ among Europe’s right wing. The most obvious manifestation of this has been the shift of many of Europe’s far right to focus on Islam. The British National Party in the UK, the Front National in France and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands have all enjoyed improved electoral performances since adopting distinctly anti-Islamic

approaches. The relative success of these groups has inevitably placed pressure on more mainstream politicians, particularly on the right, to adopt a less tolerant stance on Islam, further complicating the on-going debate about the role of Christianity and Islam in Europe's identity.

The EU's approach to Islam and the Muslim world since the end of the Cold War has therefore struggled for coherence. On the one hand major multi-lateral initiatives such as the EMP have been launched to encourage dialogue and cooperation with the Muslim World as a whole, and Europe's Muslim neighbours in particular. However, these have often been undermined either by the inconsistencies of the EMP's own policies or by the actions of member states pursuing their own agendas. Questions over Europe's identity, prompted by both external concerns such as Turkey's application to join the EU and internal issues over growing anti-Muslim feeling, have further complicated the development of any consistent strategy. In the final analysis, the central difficulty has been structural. Despite good intentions, and indeed some successes particularly in the field of cultural dialogue, the EU's inability to speak as one voice rather than 27 has scuppered any chances for an engagement with Islam and the Muslim World that achieves anything more than superficial results. With attention likely to focus on the internal crisis of the Euro for years to come, this seems unlikely to change in the near future.

UK

Since 9/11, Britain's engagement with Islam and the Muslim world seems to have been made up of two components: its engagement with the external Muslim world and policies towards its own domestic Muslim population. Then Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreign policy from 9/11 until his resignation in 2007 dominated Britain's engagement with the external Muslim world for the best part of a decade. His forceful personality and supremacy over his party and cabinet allowed him to push through unpopular actions in the Muslim World such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq and obstruction of a UN resolution to halt Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006 (Seldon 2007). As with the US, Britain's

interventionist foreign policy threatened to rupture relations with Muslim states yet, more so than George W. Bush, Blair showed a keen awareness of this and actively sought to limit the fallout. For example, while the Bush administration was satisfied that it had the support of NATO in its bombing campaign of Afghanistan in 2001, Blair attempted to win endorsement from key Muslim states, visiting Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in late October to no avail (Seldon 2004). Shuttle diplomacy to Muslim states, particularly in the Middle East but also often Pakistan, characterised much of Blair's premiership, whether in his attempts to win support for the 2003 Iraq War, to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process or to welcome Libya back into the international fold.

Yet Blair's frequent visits to the Muslim world as Prime Minister, disproportionately than to other regions save the US and Europe, were not merely the actions of a pragmatic politician seeking support for his foreign policies. Blair, like Bush, was a committed Christian, and promoted himself as a 'man of faith' who respected all religions, including Islam. Having read the Koran before he came to office and subsequently claimed to read it every day to remain 'faith literate', Blair felt confident to repeatedly comment on Islam throughout his time in office (Observer 2011). In speeches and writings he maintained that, "extremism is not the true voice of Islam," and that, "the Koran is inclusive" (Blair 2007). Immediately after 9/11, he spoke to the Labour Party conference of dialogue and reconciliation between faiths: "It is time the West confronted its ignorance of Islam" (Blair 2010). Such comments suggest that Blair sought more than just to reorder the Middle East with his policies, as seems to have been the neo-conservative goal in Washington, but to welcome what he perceived as the moderate, true nature of Islam into a comfortable co-existence with the West. Perhaps he even saw himself as ideally suited to bridge the divide, hence his eagerness to take up a largely ineffectual position as Quartet envoy to the flailing Middle East Peace Process after leaving office in 2007. Of course there was a practical component to this – he engaged more heavily with strategically important Muslim states in the Middle East and South-East Asia than those in Sub Saharan Africa and East Asia – but Blair's statements and writings suggest at least a partial ideological motive to his actions. There was thus an attempt at a wider policy towards the external Muslim world even if it largely served his

specific foreign policy agenda in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

No such concerted strategy towards Britain's own Muslim population of 1.8 million appears to have emerged in the UK. Curiously, until the 7th July 2005 terrorist attacks in London perpetrated by British Muslims, there was little public acknowledgement that Britain's foreign policy in the Muslim world could impact upon its own Muslim population. In the wake of the 7/7 bombings, as they became known, Blair declared that, "...we are not having any of this nonsense about it [the bombings] is to do with what the British are doing in Iraq or Afghanistan..." (Rich 2008). Yet in spite of his confident rhetoric, reflecting again his attempts to separate the 'moderate majority' of Muslims from an extremist minority, the bombings suggested a flaw in Britain's approach to Islam. In the 1980s and 90s an informal policy of permitting foreign Islamist political exiles to settle and preach in London, referred to as 'Londonistan' by its critics', was based on the belief that it would have no blowback on Britain (Rich 2008). However, the influence of these preachers served to radicalise elements of the domestic British Muslim population, including the four British bombers of 2005, particularly in light of Blair's own policies in the Middle East and West Asia. Mohammad Siddique Khan, the suspected leader of the bombers drew a direct link between Britain's foreign policy and the attacks in a video released soon afterwards: "Your democratically elected governments continually perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. Your support makes you directly responsible. We are at war and I am a soldier."

However, other than pleas from Blair and others for moderate members of the Muslim community to act against extremism, the bombings did not prompt any wholesale rethink of Britain's policy towards domestic Muslims. Intellectual debate on Islam in society was far less fraught than in France (see below). Though certain issues occasionally made headlines, such as former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's remarks in 2006 that he would prefer it if no women wore niqab (face veils), no serious efforts have ever been made to enforce the kind of strict secularism emanating from Paris. Instead, tension with the Muslim community has tended to be restricted to local issues, such as mosque building and halal school meals, and the politics of the far right. That said,

politically active British Muslim groups, influenced both by outside events and UK-based foreign preachers (Hussein 2007), have at times caused concern for British authorities. Since protests erupted over the 1988 Salman Rushdie affair, Muslim groups in the UK have, at different times, played a visible role in public discourse. This was most notable in 2003 when the Muslim Council of Britain were the principle partners alongside the Socialist Workers in forming the 'Stop the War Coalition'. While former Islamists such as Ed Hussein claim that many of these Muslim groups have long been dominated by Islamists, sometimes with a militant agenda, the British authorities have walked a careful line between crackdowns and cooperation. Even before 9/11 in February 2001 12 Islamist organisations were closed down under the 2000 Terrorism Act and afterwards radical preachers such as Abu Hamza of the Finsbury Park mosque and Abu Qatada that had previously been tolerated were arrested. Yet these moves were highly selective. Despite initially considering banning one of the most radical British groups, Hizb al-Tahrir, in the wake of 7/7, Blair abandoned the plans on the grounds that they were officially non-violent. Moreover since 9/11 and 7/7 there has been increased contacts between the Foreign Office and Home Office with Muslim communities in the UK to help understand extremism and roots of extremism (Rich 2008). This has included an elevated relationship with the Muslim Council of Britain with it often unofficially considered the leading British Muslim voice.

None of this, however, represents a consistent or comprehensive approach to Islam and the Muslim world on behalf of Britain. While Tony Blair's attempts to incorporate a wider engagement with Islam in general into his foreign policy rhetoric, this was still mostly instrumental to win support for his specific policies in the Middle East. Policies towards the domestic British Muslim population have been even more reactive and selective rather than part of a consistent approach. This is perhaps inevitable given the diverse nature of Britain's Muslim population, from many different states and cultures, in conjunction to Britain's laissez faire, multi-cultural approach to immigration and national identity.

France

Following 9/11 French intellectuals and scholars such as Gilles Kepel (2002) and Olivier Roy (2006), have been at the forefront of national and international public debates about the increasingly transnational character of Islamism and, more broadly, about the role of Islam in international politics. Yet a parallel construction of a Muslim and Islamic space ‘out there’ to be targeted and quelled, confronted or engaged, by specific foreign policies, as was largely the case with the U.S., has been noticeably absent in the French case. President Jacques Chirac did stand, in a sign of solidarity, shoulder to shoulder with America’s efforts to root out Al Qaeda from Afghanistan in 2001. Only to become thereafter the most vocal critique of the Iraq intervention in 2003 and Bush’s expanded freedom agenda in the broader Muslim Middle East. If any civilizational flavor is detectable in French foreign policy, this is more likely geared towards maintaining Paris’ relationship with its former colonies and francophone countries across North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Nicolas Sarkozy was at the forefront in the creation of a Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 intended partly to expand EU economic relations with non-European Mediterranean states, many of which are majority Muslim countries. The initiative was nevertheless hardly framed or legitimized in terms of, let alone structured around policies to, democratize ‘Muslims’ or reform ‘Islam’.

Yet France, like the US, the EU and the UK, was not immune, in the charged post-9/11 atmosphere, to the production and reproduction in official discourses and public policies of a religiously-defined Muslim ‘other’ – not simply secularly-labeled Moroccans, Arabs, Northern Africans, or immigrants. Its attention towards ‘Islam’ has been mostly channeled inwards, however, rather than directed outwards. Over the past decade, debates have endlessly revolved around the compatibility of Muslims and Islam – in terms of veils, burqas, hallal meat, mosques and so on – with French values of *laïcité*, the country’s national character and identity (whether secular for many progressives or Christian for many conservatives), and its Republican institutions (Vaisse 2006). Symbolically capturing the divergent paths taken by Washington and Paris were two speeches given on Muslim issues by presidents Obama and Sarkozy in the very same month of June 2009. While Obama on the 4th in Cairo would explicitly reach out to

Muslims around the world, Sarkozy on the 22nd during a joint session of Parliament famously stated for the first time that the burka was “not welcomed in France” (AFP 2009). Before the burka, a long debate was entertained on the appropriateness of the veil or headscarf. The debate had a long pedigree, dating back to 1989, but its ban in public schools was institutionalized however only after 2001 (precisely in 2004). Wariness towards Muslims domestically, may be translating into a French opposition to Turkish EU accession, but not towards a comprehensive discourse about the Muslim world ‘out there’ or a set of clearly identifiable foreign policies.

Like the US, however, France has explicitly attempted to reform and promote a ‘moderate’ and ‘liberal’ Islam compatible with so-called ‘Western values’. Unlike America who seeks to do so across North Africa, the Gulf, and Central, Southern and South-Eastern Asia, French efforts are mainly domestic. In public discourses and the media, local imams such as Soheib Bencheikh or Hassen Chalghoumi are singled as lone and brave reformers. With the support of the then Minister of the Interior Sarkozy, the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) was established in 2003. Headed by prominent Islamists and imams, the Council was created partly to formalize relations between the government and French Muslims (no matter whether religious or not), and partly to encourage a homegrown open and liberal version of Islam (BBC 2002). High profile efforts to influence the trajectory of Islam within the French borders have continued since then. The Ministry of Interior launched in 2008 a program, implemented by the Catholic Institute of Paris, to educate imams and Muslim organization leaders about France’s history, laws and values with the goal of shaping a “French Islam”.⁵

Conclusion

This survey of US, EU, UK and French discourses and practices towards Islam and the

⁵ <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/20847/islam-france-imam-training>

Muslim world since the end of the Cold War and, specifically, following 9/11 has suggested a range of similarities and differences across cases. On some level engagement with an externally perceived and reified Muslim world ‘out there’ is present in all four case studies. This however is most pronounced in the US where a wide range of global initiatives that cut across countries and societies from South East Asia to West Africa passing through the Middle East and everything in between have been developed in the last decade. The other three actors have also attempted external engagement but more modest in scope and intent, whether the EU’s localized EMP for its Muslim neighbours, Tony Blair’s attempts to justify Britain’s foreign policy with a broader effort to ‘understand’ Islam, or France’s continued close relationship with former colonies in North Africa. However, for these latter three engaging with Islam has been as much about internal domestic concerns compared to foreign policy, an issue shown to be more marginal instead to American policy makers.

Why do we see such differences in approach on each side of the Atlantic? Surely identity plays a role. For instance, the equivalent of the identity crisis faced by the EU, conceived either as a secular or a Christian space, over whether to admit the Muslim Turkish ‘other’ does not exist for the US. Similarly a broad US civic national identity discourse, based also on the concept of religious freedom, has meant that questions over how to integrate a domestic Muslim population, as seen particularly in laicist France and to some extent in multicultural Britain, have not been as salient. This said, the growing string of incidents in America surrounding the Park 51 / Ground Zero mosque debate, domestic-born terror suspects, and the repeated claims levied in a derogatory way by certain parts of the American public that “Obama is a Muslim”, all suggest that the identity question remains somewhat unsettled also in the US. Issues of identity, however, are not the whole story.

Old-fashioned geopolitics offers an important perspective. In terms of geography and population, Islam and the Muslim world are far closer to the EU and European states than to the US. For the US to primarily conceive of the Muslim world as something external is therefore not surprising: it is thousands of miles from the closest Muslim

majority state and Muslims make up less than 1% of its population. In contrast, Muslim majority states exist within Europe, have applied for EU membership and are geographically close, while domestic Muslim populations are as high as 5-10% of the population in some states (France). For Europeans to view Islam as more of an internal issue than the US is thus explicable. A further reason is power capabilities. The US, as a superpower, is able to project itself – whether always successfully is another matter – over a civilizational category of people on a global scale. The EU, in contrast, as discussed, struggles to maintain a consistent foreign policy on any matter and thus is only able to project its influence over Muslim states in its neighbourhood – and even then repeatedly undermines itself. France and Britain, similarly, lack the capacity to reach globally in the way they once did.

Closely connected to power are interests that, when it comes to ‘Islam’ issues, are often very different between the US and Europeans. The US is a global power and thus orientates itself to face down global threats and preserve its global interests. With its embassies targeted in Kenya and Tanzania, its ships attacked in the ports of Yemen, and 9/11 mostly planned in distant Afghanistan by an organization headed by Saudis and Egyptians, all led to a perceived need to face down the threat emanating from ‘radical’ Islam at a global level – whether in Tora Bora, Baghdad, Jakarta or Mogadishu. In contrast, even if Europeans may share some security concerns with their American cousins, as more modest regional powers the EU, France and Britain are restricted instead to view their interests and threats more locally. Ranging from the impact on migration patterns of crises in the Middle East, tackling unemployment and disenfranchisement among young immigrant populations from neighboring regions or old colonial territories, or the threat of Turkish accession in upsetting the internal balance of power between larger EU states.

Overall, though, what this comparative analysis underscores is that, not only there are multiple and conflicting approaches across cases to ‘Islam’, but there are also multiple and conflicting understandings of what ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslim world’ are. Indeed Islam, and with it the Muslim world, proves to be an extremely malleable entity

with its internal characteristics and external borders changing according to each country's and region's sense of identity, geographical location, power and interests. Ultimately it seems that the way the US, EU, UK and France approach the Muslim 'other', reveals far more about them than it does about Islam itself.

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