

## **Courting Islam: The Evolution of Perceptions of Islam within the British and American governments from the European Colonial period to the War on Terror**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This article explores the changing attitudes to, and perceptions of Islam that developed over a period in which substantive engagements between Anglo-American strategic interests brought them more and more into contact with Muslim majority governments and cultures.

**Methodology:** Using historical analysis, the article examines selected primary literature to understand how perceptions of Islam within American and British policymaking circles evolved during the European Colonial period.

**Findings:** The key finding is the extent to which perceptions of Islam and Muslims were governed not just by the nature of the incidents and issues that politicians and officials were dealing with, but also by the shifting cultural shifts taking place in America and Britain.

**Originality:** The article's originality lies in the methodological approach of examining US-British policymaker's perceptions of Islam based upon their experiences. In so doing, the article offers an approach to West-Islam relational debates that avoids critiquing the validity of the observations and instead deepens our understandings of where the perceptions came from as a basis for improved dialogues in the future.

**Keywords:** Islam; Muslim; West; Government; Policymaking; History; America; Britain

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## رؤية الإسلام: تطور المفاهيم المتعلقة بالإسلام داخل الحكومتين البريطانية والأمريكية بداية من فترة الاستعمار الأوروبي وحتى فترة الحرب ضد الإرهاب

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### ملخص البحث

أهداف البحث: تستطلع هذه المقالة تغير الاتجاهات إزاء الإسلام والمفاهيم والتصورات المتعلقة به التي شهدت تطورًا كبيرًا خلال فترة أدت فيها الارتباطات الجوهرية بين المصالح الاستراتيجية الأنجلو أمريكية إلى تواصلهم بشكل متزايد مع حكومات وثقافات ذات أغلبية مسلمة.

منهج الدراسة: تتمثل في استخدام التحليل التاريخي، حيث تتناول المقالة المؤلفات الأولية المختارة لفهم تطور التصورات والمفاهيم بشأن الإسلام والمسلمين داخل دوائر رسم السياسة الأمريكية والبريطانية خلال فترة الاستعمار الأوروبي.

النتائج: تتمثل النتيجة الرئيسة في تحديد مدى تأثير الحكومات بالتصورات والمفاهيم ذات الصلة بالإسلام والمسلمين، ليس فقط من خلال طبيعة الأحداث والقضايا التي كان يتعامل معها السياسيون والمسؤولون، ولكن أيضًا من خلال التحولات الثقافية المتغيرة التي تحدث في أمريكا وبريطانيا.

أصالة البحث: تكمن أصالة المقالة في انفرادها بالأسلوب المنهجي لبحث تصورات ومفاهيم واضعي السياسات الأمريكية-البريطانية عن الإسلام، المستندة إلى ما لديهم من معارف وخبرات. ولتحقيق ذلك، تطرح المقالة مقارنةً لمناقشة العلاقة بين الإسلام والغرب يتجنب التطرق إلى التعقيب أو انتقاد مدى صحة الملاحظات والآراء المختلفة ويتبنى بدلاً من ذلك فكرة تعميق فهمنا لمصدر التصورات والمفاهيم باعتبارها أساسًا لتحسين الحوار في المستقبل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإسلام، المسلمين، الغرب، الحكومة، رسم السياسات، التاريخ، أمريكا، بريطانيا.

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the British and American government's perceptions of Islam over the past two hundred years by analysing the responses to, and correspondence about a number of incidents primarily in foreign rather than domestic affairs. Its key argument is that, whilst US and British policymaker's perceptions of Islam were certainly impacted by the events that occurred during the period, their perceptions of Islam were substantially mediated through the dominant domestic political philosophies of the day.

Before moving into a discussion of the primary literature itself, a number of methodological points should be made.

Firstly, in covering such an extended period of time, the article, by its very nature, cannot provide detailed discussion of all the incidents and papers produced over the era in question. However, given that the goal of the article is to understand a changing cultural arc within the US and British governments, the approach taken can be justified on the basis that such changes take a long time and therefore, in order to demonstrate such changes, an extended period of time needs to be covered in the article.

Secondly, the dates chosen for the study might appear to be rather arbitrary on one level, but they have been chosen because they encompass the beginning of an Independent United States and, therefore, its earliest encounters with Islam in that capacity at the same time as British colonial ambitions began to take flight as well as, the growing range and depth of British policymaker's engagements with Islam and Muslims as well. The second date marks a change in British government (Labour to Coalition-Conservative) as well as, a substantive shift in thinking about the counter-radicalisation strategy.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in America, Barak Obama was re-orientating American foreign and domestic policy thinking in the light of the financial crisis, changing strategic priorities and growing US self-questioning.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, 2008 to 2010 ushers in a new dynamic on both sides of the Atlantic and is therefore an appropriate time to end.

Thirdly, examining the correspondence, memoranda and public remarks about the selected incidents and events relating to Islam and Muslims defines scope of the views which are to be considered by only considering the perspectives of policymakers alone. This approach avoids discussion of the hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of interactions between the citizens of these states and either Muslim communities in their own states, or Muslims encountered overseas. As such, it creates a contained framework within which perceptions can be examined and any patterns analysed.

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1 Therese O'Toole, Daniel DeHanas and Tariq Modood, 'Balancing tolerance, security and Muslim engagement in the United Kingdom: the impact of the "Prevent" agenda' *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(3), 373-389.

2 Michelle Bentley (ed.) *The Obama Doctrine: A legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy?* (London: Routledge, 2017) 6-11.

Fourthly, it avoids being drawn into debates about whether the experiences being discussed were truly representative of Islam or not and therefore, whether the viewpoints themselves were balanced and reasonable or not. The perceptions of Muslims on the validity or otherwise of the policymakers' opinions are therefore deliberately excluded as they are outside of this remit. This article deliberately avoids making judgements about the viewpoints expressed in order to serve its core purpose: to explain how US and British government perceptions of Islam have developed and to understand how those perceptions have changed over time because of shifting socio-political culture across the North Atlantic region. It also avoids getting drawn into arguments about the doctrines of Islam, or the theological validity of the actions of the protagonists in any given event. Instead, the article asks how that incident or event might have helped to shape Anglo-American policymaker's perceptions of Islam and in so doing provides a basis for thinking through how policy outcomes might be improved for both policymakers on the one hand and Muslims on the other.

The article outlines some relevant cultural and historical context before describing and analysing the correspondence around some specific historical incidents as well as personal reflections (public and private) about Islam of leading US and British policymakers. The article will conclude with some observations on the perceptions revealed in the context of the shifting politico-philosophical climate in America and Britain that will be explored briefly next.

## **2. The wider philosophical cultural context in America and Britain**

A key role of modern government from the perspective of Western political philosophy is no longer the defence of a specific ideological position deemed to be 'true' and therefore worthy of state defence, but rather, the establishment and protection of a 'cohesive' (and therefore peaceful or harmonious) society. It was a principle that was established out of the upheavals of the European Reformation and developed by liberal governments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.<sup>1</sup> This ideological shift is important in the context of this article.

A fundamental element of the 'cohesion rather than truth' principle was the privatisation of religion, powerfully argued by the highly influential Dutch thinker Hugo Grotius and developed by more recent political philosophers, particularly the American John Rawls. The experiences of the Reformation Wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries convinced Grotius especially that lasting peace could only come to exist in Europe if governments moved away from defending religious dogma towards allowing religious freedom without adhering to one 'orthodoxy'.<sup>2</sup> This theory did not become instantly embedded and other factors, especially the intellectual challenge to religious belief and institutions brought by the Enlightenment's appeal to 'Reason' along with the scientifically

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1 Timothy Shah, "Making the Christian world safe for Liberalism: From Grotius to Rawls" *The Political Quarterly* (2000) 71(7), 121-139

2 Spyridon Kaltsas, "Habermas, Taylor and Connolly on Secularism, Pluralism and the Post-Secular Sphere" *Religions* (2019) 19(8), 460-479.

observable, were important factors. Nevertheless, the ‘secular public space’ gradually became orthodox across Europe, although its earliest expression was enshrined most explicitly in the American Constitution (1787).<sup>1</sup>

That principal became a fundamental bedrock as public challenges to religion grew over the following centuries. Whether it be through narratives of Creation which omitted any reference to the work of God in Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859), improvements in medicine and technology or the anger felt towards the Anglican church for its wholehearted support of the First World War, religion was pushed away from the public arena.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the state took over many of the roles that had traditionally been done by the church, especially in relation to welfare, education and health, effectively removing Churches from their traditional community roles. Religion and state, by the early twentieth century were no longer bound together and the notion of the state defending any one religious doctrine became anachronistic.

John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* (1974) wove together these strands and added to it by establishing in modern Western political philosophy the principle of ‘Reasonableness’ which, in a religious context, was the idea that religious expressions or opinions in the public sphere were only acceptable if they stayed within the bounds of established principles of appropriate public behaviour.<sup>3</sup> His highly influential work continues to be the bedrock of Anglo-American policy thinking when grappling with issues which have an ethical, even religious element. That principle has been underpinned by the dominance of Postmodernism: a theory which has removed completely the concept of ‘objective truth’ from policymaking discourse in the West and has replaced it instead with (theoretically at least) ‘evidence-based’ policymaking.<sup>4</sup>

This broad-scale philosophical shift is vital to understand in the context of understanding US-British policymakers’ perceptions of Islam, for it has been the filter on the lens of their perceptions and observations; the medium through which the incidents which will be discussed shortly, have been interpreted. This has not been the only factor governing the perceptions of Islam amongst American and British policymakers, but it has been a vitally important underlying factor which has occurred independently of the incidents and encounters with Muslims which have taken place. This context will continue to be discussed as the primary material is analysed and it is to that material that we will now turn.

### **3. Anglo-American Engagements with Islam**

Since its earliest days, America has needed to engage with Islam and Muslims. The first over-

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1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press, 2009) 227-248.

2 Thomas Heyck, ‘The Decline of Christianity in Twentieth Century Britain’ *Albion* 28(3), 437-453.

3 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1974) 42- 52.

4 Peter John, *Analysing Public Policy*, (London: Continuum, 2002) 36.

seas war the newly-created United States of America fought was against the Barbary Corsairs who had been menacing US merchant shipping. The outworking of this menace as far as high government was concerned was that two early US Presidents encountered representatives of Muslim government and were exposed to Islamic scripture. In 1786 a young Thomas Jefferson and John Adams met with Ambassador Sidi Haji Abdrahman in Paris in order to attempt to try and put a stop to the Corsair attacks which had been troubling American merchants. Abdrahman defended the actions of the corsairs by arguing (according to Jefferson's account) that

“..[the right to take slaves] was founded on the laws of the Prophet, that it is written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.”<sup>1</sup>

As noted in the ‘Introduction’, this article deliberately avoids discussion of the rights and wrongs of doctrinal interpretations. What is important from the perspective of this article therefore is not whether the Ambassador's interpretations of scripture (as relayed by Jefferson) were accurate or doctrinally correct, but that the impression the words left on both Jefferson and Adams: men who would both lead their country. For Adams particularly, the meeting appears to have been vital in constructing his understanding of Muslims and Islam as something that was, almost by definition, a threat to his country and way of life as he recorded in his *Essay on the Turks* (1830).<sup>2</sup> Adams, like Jefferson was an important political figure (even outside of his Presidency) for more than five decades. His views on Islam were therefore highly influential in US policymaking circles.

For Thomas Jefferson, this early encounter with Islam, coming as it did in the wake of the recent Declaration of Independence and the creation of the United States, was important in shaping his views on the world beyond the United States, but does not seem to have been as decisive as its impact on Adams' apparently was. Jefferson remained interested in Islam his whole life, but, given that Jefferson himself, as with vast majority of American politicians and officials of the time, had only tiny fragmentary engagements with Islam and Muslims and mostly in a negative context, his curiosity does not appear to have developed into a concerted investigation. So, the meeting with Ambassador Abdrahman whilst it impacted the personal views of Jefferson and Adams, had little material policy outworkings as, during this period, other than the brief war over the Barbary Corsairs (1801-5), the War of 1812 (1812-15) and the later War in the Philippines (1899-1902) the United States was primarily intent on focusing on domestic affairs (including the Mexican-American War 1846-48). That being said, these early engagements, however fleeting and un-representative of the wider culture

1 Julian Boyd, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1785-22<sup>nd</sup> June 1786, Vol. 9*, (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1954) 36.

2 Lynn Parsons, *John Quincy Adams – A Biography*, (Lanham (MD): Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) 48.

of Islam, embedded a sense of Islam as a faith that was alien to the United States and its ideological values, despite the presence of Islam on the continent (albeit in tiny numbers) from the time of the Conquistadors and the early European settlements on the Eastern seaboard.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it should be born in mind that the views of Islam held in elite American political circles were not simply based upon interactions and perspectives formed upon the North American continent alone. For all of the early American Presidents and senior officials came from a European heritage (especially British) and so the longer-term experiences of, and perceptions of, European experiences with Islam were also carried across to the New World.

As with American politicians and officials, these British perceptions of Islam were frequently based upon negative experiences, including multiple wars and the threat of enslavement posed by the Barbary Corsairs who raided throughout the Mediterranean and even up to the coast of mainland Britain.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Britain's royal family in 1780, the Hanoverians, had come from Saxony and the first Hanoverian monarch (George I) had spent much of his youth fighting the Ottomans.

However, whilst there were a considerable number of combative experiences of Islam, there were also a far wider and long-lasting range of non-combative experiences as a result of diplomatic engagement, trade and Empire. Indeed, going back to the Medieval and Renaissance courts of Europe, Abbasid and Ottoman officials had occasionally been received, most notably perhaps in 1238 CE when King Henry III of England received an emissary from the Abbasid Caliph Ala ud-Din, requesting military assistance against the Mongol threat to the Muslim Empire.<sup>3</sup> These irregular interactions fostered an awareness of Muslim lands and Islam as a faith, but they were seen as too remote to be discussed or explored in depth. Especially in comparison the threat posed by other European kingdoms. Evidence of this attitude is found in the fact that, when England was threatened by the Spanish Armada (1588), Queen Elizabeth I wrote to the Ottoman Sultan Murad II requesting aid against the Spanish.<sup>4</sup> Although the request was unique, it was a signal that the Ottomans were considered less of a threat than the Catholic monarchs of Europe. That request for military assistance was reciprocated some centuries later when, by invitation from the then Ottoman Sultan, British (and French) troops battled Russian expansionism in the Black Sea region in the 1850s.<sup>5</sup>

This cautious and relatively rare diplomatic relationship was also tempered by reports of a series of massacres by Turkish troops in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that so outraged the renowned British Prime

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1 Kambiz GhaneaBissiri, *A History of Islam in America*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 72.

2 Linda Colley, "Britain and Islam: Different Perspectives on Difference, 1600-1800" *Yale Review* (2002) 88(4), 1-20.

3 Gerald MacLean (ed), *Britain and the Muslim World: Historical Perspectives* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); Martin Pugh, *Britain and Islam: A History from 622 to the Present Day*, (Cambridge (MA): Yale University Press, 2019).

4 Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558-1713*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 42-58.

5 William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of Delhi, 1857*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) 15.

Minister William Gladstone, that he came out of his then retirement in order to lobby for a far more aggressive British policy towards the Ottomans, describing them as “reactionary” and contrasting the progressive ‘modernism’ of Enlightenment thinking with the perceived ‘medievalism’ of the Ottomans.<sup>1</sup> As Fahriye Yildizeli notes, Gladstone had held a life-long interest in religion and had become interested in Islam, reading Edward Gibbon’s account of the life of Muhammad in his youth.<sup>2</sup> So, whilst Gladstone’s tone in his *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* display a similar distain for Islam as a religion as Adams and is clearly influenced by Gibbon’s portrait of Muhammad. Gladstone also displays a more nuanced understanding of different denominational and ideological streams within Islam.

Similarly, Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s views on Islam were also formed on the back of negative exposures. In Churchill’s case, this came in the form of his participation (as a War Correspondent) in the British campaigns in the Northwest Frontier Province as well as in the final act of the Sudanese Mahdi Rebellion; the Battle of Omdurman (1898). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that, when writing about his impressions of Islam (as he did in two pamphlets: *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898) and *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* (1899)) he expressed rather negative views of it.<sup>3</sup> However, rather than the anger and revulsion at Islam expressed by both Adams and Gladstone, Churchill’s tone was different: his perception of Islam was of a faith that was a ‘burden’ to its followers, rather than a benefit.

Interestingly, Churchill was writing at a time when public fascination in ‘the Orient’ including the lands dominated by Islam, was growing rapidly both in Britain and in America. The opportunities for more extensive travel meant that aristocrats in Britain and wealthy Americans increasingly replaced the ‘Grand Tour’ (the traditional finish of an aristocrat’s education: a trip around the classical sites of Europe) with trips further afield, enabled by improved steam and mechanical technologies. As a result both of these new technologies and the needs of the imperial administration, increasing numbers of aristocrats travelled to Egypt and India to take advantage of commercial and administrative opportunities, but also to find out about cultures which seemed so remote to those of their European and North American homelands. It was a trend which began to yield a growing number of European and American experts in Islam who began to influence both the American and British political elites’ perceptions of Islam (which we shall return to), as well as a number of prominent converts to Islam.

Those converts included the prominent US diplomat (Mohammed) Alexander Russell Webb

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1 William Gladstone, *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, (London: John Murray, 1876) 81-90.

2 Fahriye Yildizeli “W.E. Gladstone and British Policy towards the Ottoman Empire”, (Exeter: University of Exeter Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2016) 105.

3 Winston Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1898, 2015) and *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan*, (London & Mineola (NY): Dover Publications Inc, 1899, 2012).

whose pathway to Islam came through the Theosophist Movement (a blend of Occult and syncretic metaphysical philosophies which fused elements of Sufism, Buddhism and Hindu traditions) and an initial conversion to Buddhism in 1881. Webb converted to Sunni Islam several years later after coming to the initial conclusion that Muhammad was a bringer of special secret teaching. Whilst he was US Ambassador to the Philippines, he moved into orthodox Sunni Islam and, after resigning his diplomatic post in 1893, began to write about his faith and plan *da'wa* trips back to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, for the purposes of this article, his conversion did not seem to arouse obvious concerns within the US Foreign Service. Indeed, Webb was called upon by President Cleveland to provide expert analysis about Islam and Muslims when the Moro Rebellion erupted in 1899.<sup>2</sup> US officials and politicians appear to have been bemused by Webb's conversion although that did not preclude them from making use of his expertise. Implicit in their correspondence about Webb's conversion was a confusion about why one would want to convert, suggesting that the officials believed to be a regressive step, rather than a dangerous one.<sup>3</sup>

The attitude to the US officials in relation to Webb's conversion was mirrored to some degree by those of British officials relating to the conversion of former diplomat and businessman St John Philby in 1930. Their correspondence suggested the same bemusement at Philby's choice that US officials had expressed about Webb's, but British officials went further. For concern was expressed that Philby's conversion would lead him to change loyalties away from Britain to the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> Their concern was not therefore related to any question around the validity of the truth claims of Islam, but rather, were based around policy and national security. For the files reveal alarm at the potential of Philby's conversion and subsequent activism on behalf of King Saud (who was a personal friend of Philby's) not only to draw attention to British manoeuvrings in the region, but also how Philby's change of faith might lead to a switch of loyalties.<sup>5</sup> With his knowledge of the workings of the Foreign Service and his understanding of British policy aims in the region, Philby's conversion represented a political threat.

This lack of concern about Philby's conversion in relation to questions of competing truth-claims, speaks to the dynamic highlighted at the beginning of this article: the slow, but inexorable shift in government thinking, both in Britain and in the US, away from any sense of using state power to defend 'truth' (as was seen, for example, in the European Reformation wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and early seventeenth centuries), towards what has come to be labelled a 'pluralist' settlement in which

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1 Umar Abdullah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 92.

2 Ibid.

3 US Consuls in Manila, Philippine Islands, "Dispatches, October 1887 – December 1893" (Washington DC: National Archives Records, 1969) See also Brent Singleton, *Yankee Muslim: The Asian Travels of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb*, (Maryland: Borgo Press, 2007) 51.

4 India Office, "IOR/L/PS/15, File 1654" (London New Delhi: His Majesty's Government Printing Office, 1925 -35).

5 Ibid.

the overriding domestic concern of government was and is, social cohesion and harmony.<sup>1</sup> For the concerns raised about both Webb and Philby's conversions were not about the choice of Islam as a faith, but about the political or security implications of their choices. Furthermore, the conversions are also useful in evidencing not just the shifting internal attitudes to faith and 'truth', but also to highlight that, just because the views of leaders such as Adams, Gladstone and Churchill were not favourable towards Islam, this did not mean that government as a whole was hostile to Islam, indeed, as will be seen, in a number of ways, the general view of Islam and Muslims within the corridors of power in Washington DC and London had far more to do with geo-strategic, security and economic considerations than it did questions of its perceived rights and wrongs.

This subtle difference between American and British officials in relation to conversion by their officials is reflective also, not just of geo-strategic concerns, but also of perceptions of Islam and Muslims in relation to broad Imperial security concerns. For, perhaps the biggest difference in the perceptions of Islam and Muslims evidenced in the files (until recently) comes in the area of Islam as a force for social cohesion or revolution.

The British were suspicious of Muslims and of the religion of Islam as a potential ideological driver of rebellion.<sup>2</sup> In their eyes, they had at least five examples of what they saw as the propensity of Muslims towards sedition and rebellion: the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 (also known as the First War of Independence), the Mahdi Rebellion in the 1880s, the Pan-Islamic movement, the Silk Letter Conspiracy (1912) and the First World War (1914-18).

American experiences of Islam as a force for rebellion had some similarities to the British experience, such as with the Moro Rebellion in the Philippines in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But this isolated incident was not enough to impact US policymaker's long-term views of Islam. Furthermore, the rebellion was very remote from them and there were not the frequent, even continuous, interactions with Muslims that were seen by the British. There was therefore a very limited flow of Muslims back and forward from overseas territory to homeland (although there were a substantial number from Greater Syria recruited to work in the factories of Henry Ford), unlike Britain, which saw substantial numbers of Muslim traders, as well as lawyers, students and missionaries, move back and forward between British overseas territories and Britain itself.<sup>3</sup> Consequently even up to the Second World War perceptions of Islam amongst American political elites were based upon only snippets of experiences. Often therefore, perceptions of Islam came through the strong missionary movements

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1 Shah, 'Making the Christian world safe for Liberalism', 136.

2 The extent and longevity of this perception is documented in John Ferris "'The Internationalism of Islam': The British Perception of a Muslim Menace, 1840-1951' *Intelligence and National Security* (2009) 24(1): 57-77.

3 See, for example, Sushila Nasta (ed.) *India in Britain: South Asian Networks and Connections, 1858-1950* (London: Palgrave, 2013) 72-93. It is calculated that approximately one third of all Muslims alive in 1900 were living under British rule. Concerns about security were therefore not simply founded on worries about potential small-scale rebellion, but on the potential for total Imperial collapse if widespread Muslim rebellion against imperial rule were to occur.

which emerged out of the US in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, perceptions of Islam and Muslims were seen particularly through the lens of religious freedom, Christian minorities and converts. This was particularly true of President Woodrow Wilson who was a key delegate in the post-First World War peace conferences. Wilson's perception of the Ottomans was governed by the reports from Turkey about the Ottoman's treatment of its religious minorities and converts.<sup>2</sup> As a result, and despite the fact that he had little real interest in the fate of Turkey, his participation focussed around ensuring that the defeated Ottoman Empire should become a place in which Western missionaries and converts from Islam to Christianity should be protected from discrimination or persecution.<sup>3</sup> In this, his actions and the perceptions from which they came, had echoes of the British perceptions in this period, of Islam and the Ottoman Empire specifically as a place of repression and ignorance.<sup>4</sup> This represented a substantial shift in thinking from the Renaissance period when Islam and Muslims were both feared and admired for the power of their civilisation. Tales brought back from the rare Ambassadorial trips to Ottoman and Mughal Courts by English courtiers, particularly Sir Thomas Roe, merged with the stories brought back by traders, to paint a picture of an extraordinary and powerful civilisation.<sup>5</sup> What had caused the change in perception of Islamic Civilisation in the two to three hundred years in between was not just the growth of the European Empires and its technological advancements, but the change in the philosophical lens that was described in section two. For Islam was being perceived through the Enlightenment lens that had midwived liberal progressiveness.

That same philosophical framework, coupled with changing geo-strategic aims and growing diaspora communities also began to shift perceptions once again in the mid-twentieth century. For, within just two decades, the perceptions of Islam and Muslims had shifted from the lens of 'Enlightenment progress', religious freedom and the protection of non-Muslims, to Cold War considerations.

In the evolving confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, Sunni Islam was seen as a source of social cohesion which bound together communities across the Muslim majority world. Evidence of this attitude is found in the discussions at the State Department in the 1950s in which one of the department's Arabists, Harold Gidden, noted that Islam provided the social glue for the Middle East region.<sup>6</sup> For Gidden that 'glue' was a vital tool to be exploited in order to ensure that Communism did not spread to the region. He and his colleagues in the State Department therefore developed a propaganda campaign which had two aims: firstly, to try and reassure Muslims in the

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1 Jenna Gibbs, *Global Protestant Missions: Politics, Reform and Communication, 1730s-1930s*, (London: Routledge, 2019) 28.

2 Laurence Evans, *United States Policy and the Partition of Turkey, 1919-24*, (Baltimore (MD): John Hopkins University Press, 1965) 71.

3 Charles Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, (Boston (MA): Houghton Mifflin, 1928) 28-31.

4 Pugh, *Britain and Islam*, 138.

5 MacLean and Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World*, 53-54.

6 G.H Damon, "DoS 511.80/4-252, CS/Y Memorandum", Washington DC: Department of State, (2<sup>nd</sup> April 1952).

Middle East and beyond that US support for Israel did not mean that they saw Muslims as enemies. Secondly, to engage in an ideological campaign designed to orientate Arab and South Asian states towards America, rather than towards Communism and the USSR.<sup>1</sup> For that purpose a series of exchange events between Arab states and American communities were arranged, as well as a number of broadcasts to the Middle East. In Washington DC, approval was given for an 'Islamic Centre' as part of the same initiative. Although no government funding was put towards it (due to the strict separation of religious and state), the centre was opened in 1957 by President Eisenhower himself in June 1957.

On one level therefore, especially early in the Cold War, Sunni Islam was a useful socio-cultural 'tool' to be used to combat Soviet expansionism. This 'tool' was most famously used in the anti-Soviet Afghani campaign when the Mujahidin were armed and trained by the CIA. On the other hand Shi'a Islam was seen as a disrupter even before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In a State Department briefing given in late 1977 by the Bureau of Intelligence, the resistance to the rule of the Shah was characterised as having within it all the "hallmarks of the Shi'a doctrine of dissimulation in the face of a superior force".<sup>2</sup> Indeed Mattin Bilgari analyses State Department cables and White House communications from President Carter to conclude the US government saw the Iranian Revolution as a direct outworking of Shi'a doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

More recent events, one might assume, might have changed US-British thinking in the wake of the activities of al-Qa'ida and DAESH. Yet that does not appear to have been the case. Moreover, both Presidents and Prime Ministers have been careful not to make generalised statements about either Sunni or Shi'a Islam that earlier leaders did. For example, George W Bush, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was careful to stress that he found no teaching in Islam that directly contradicts Western democratic principles.

"...These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it is important for my fellow Americans to understand that..."<sup>4</sup>

These sentiments echoed those expressed by President Eisenhower when he opened the Islamic Centre in Washington DC in June 1957 and, nearly forty years later, President Bill Clinton also echoed those sentiments as he highlighted what he saw as the natural harmony between American values and Islamic ones.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Ibid.

2 Franklin Huddle, "The Future of Iran: Implications for the US, Iran Documents 01144 DSNA", Washington DC: Department of State, (13<sup>th</sup> January 1977).

3 Mattin Bilgari, "'Captive to the Demonology of the Iranian Mobs': US Foreign Policy and Perceptions of Shi'a Islam during the Iranian Revolution" (2016) 40(6): 579-605.

4 George W Bush, "Remarks at the Islamic Center, Washington DC, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2001" [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-islamic-center-washington](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-islamic-center-washington), retrieved on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

5 Bill Clinton, *Remarks to the Jordanian Parliament, Transcript, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1994* [www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu), re-

However, at the same time as these public remarks were being made by the these Presidents, within their administrations, advisors such as Mortimer Zuckerman, Charles Krauthammer and Daniel Pipes were framing Islam as replacing the defeated USSR as the greatest threat to America and her allies.<sup>1</sup> However, it is clear that Zuckerman, Krauthammer and Pipes' whilst important, were not decisive, for anonymous National Security Council officials in an interview with author Fawaz Gerges in 1995 argued that Islam itself was not necessarily the motivating factor in terrorist actions such as the attack on the USS Cole, but rather it was anti-Americanism instead.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a review of the relationship between authoritarianism and Islam for the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq by Daniel Brumberg of the Strategic Studies Institute argued that the roots of the authoritarian regimes which helped to nurture Islamism and anti-Americanism could also not be traced to doctrines within Islam itself.<sup>3</sup> It seemed therefore that developing knowledge and expertise within the administrations, as well as the influence of Postmodernism and declining influence of Enlightenment progressivism were helping to nuance and refine the perceptions of Islam and Muslims within US administrations.

In recent years, on the other side of the Atlantic, successive British Prime Ministers have also sought to a more nuanced narrative in response to the terrorist attack and the rise of DAESH in their public remarks. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister during the period of what became known as 'the Rushdie Affair', when reflecting upon the incident two decades later in the context of terrorism concerns, observed that the core issues did not lie within religion, instead she likened terrorism done in the name of Islam to early Bolshevism: "an ideology pursued by fanatics who were also well-armed".<sup>4</sup> A similar argument was made by Tony Blair in a speech made following the July 2005 attacks in London. Interestingly, after he left office, in a speech made in front of the 9/11 Memorial in New York in 2015, Blair proposed that the ideological origins of the terrorists did not lie in the doctrines of Islam, but did lie in conspiracy theories alive within Muslim communities and the schoolchildren being given a prejudicial view of the world.<sup>5</sup> In saying this he was echoing sentiments expressed by senior British government officials and leaders such as Miles Hann who, back in 1956 sought to create a British Muslim university in East Africa specifically to counter what he considered the pernicious

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trieved 8<sup>th</sup> February 20121.

- 1 *Hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Terrorism and America: A Comprehensive review of the threat, policy and law, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1993.* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994) Serial J-103-9.
- 2 Fawaz Gerges *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Civilizations?* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 50.
- 3 Daniel Brumberg, 'Democratization versus Liberalization in the Arab World: dilemmas and challenges for US Foreign Policy' (Carlisle (PA): Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005) 19-22.
- 4 Margaret Thatcher, "Islamism is the New Bolshevism" *The Guardian* 12<sup>th</sup> February 2002. See also Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy* (London, New York: Atlantic Books, 2009) 37.
- 5 Anon, "Tony Blair: Islamic Extremists' Ideology Enjoys the Support of Many Muslims", *The Guardian* 6<sup>th</sup> October 2015; Milan Rai, *The London Bombings, Islam and the Iraq War*, (London: Pluto Press, 2006) 72.

teachings being spread from Al-Azhar University.<sup>1</sup> Concerns about educational establishments in Muslim majority states and Muslim diaspora communities were also expressed by American officials, notably in the 2003 Hearings of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security in which Dr. Alex Alexiev produced extensive data on how funds were being spent, he said, on “preaching, [promoting] Wahabbi hatred.”<sup>2</sup> A *Country Studies* briefing note on Education in Saudi Arabia in the US Library of Congress from 1993 hinted at similar concerns, noting not only the narrow focus of subjects taught, but the lack of equality in how each gender was educated.<sup>3</sup>

One might argue that these concerns, expressed as they were in the post-Second World War era and indeed in the Twenty-First century suggested that British and American perceptions of Islam and Muslims had not really changed from the disparaging, Enlightenment -defined thinking expressed by American and British politicians (and officials) in the post-First World War period. However, it is important to note that the concerns expressed in the Twenty-First century were specific to issues of educational curricula, rather than any generalised comment about the faith of Islam as a whole, as had been the case in the preceding centuries.

This observation highlights the fact that, whereas in the past American and British political elites appear to have been quick to use one experience of, or encounter with Muslims (whether negative or positive) as a basis for making wider declarative statements about the faith of Islam in general, that is no longer the case. A number of factors have helped to bring this about, but perhaps most critically, the development of a cadre of experts within government departments has brought, not just their growing knowledge of Islam and geo-political issues in Muslim majority regions into their advice, but also the changing philosophical culture alluded to in section two. Meaning that, not only has the nuancing of the understanding of Islam and Muslim issues improved within relevant government departments such as the Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office in the UK, and the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department in the US (in many cases now counting Muslim adherents within their ranks) but that the rubric within which perceptions (and judgements) were made about Islam have also changed. This expert analysis which has become available to US and British leaders over past century has become an important internal tool. This is not to say that there were no British or American expert advisors available to past Presidents and Prime Ministers, but it would be fair to say that, even within the Arabists in the Dip-

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1 Andrew Montgomery-Cunningham, “Proposal to Establish an Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, SSA13/05”, London: Department of Social Services, (19<sup>th</sup> July 1956).

2 US Senate, “Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security” Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, (26<sup>th</sup> June 2003) 41.

3 US Library of Congress “Education in Saudi Arabia” *Country Studies*. (Washington DC: Library of Congress Publishing, 1993) 14.

lomatic Corps of both countries, there was both a smaller pool of expertise and those experts were frequently interpreting Islam and Muslims through an Orientalist lens.<sup>1</sup> For example, perhaps the foremost British expert in Islam and the Arab world in the post-First World War period was Thomas Arnold (although there were certainly a number of others such as Ronald Storrs and Arnold Toynbee). When Arnold was asked for his advice on the highly sensitive and politically charged question of what British policy towards the defeated Ottoman Sultan-Caliph should be, the advice he offered compared the doctrinal understandings of the standing and role of the Caliph to Christian clergy, including the Pope.<sup>2</sup> Whilst such comparisons have currency at a surface level, they also can lead (and did lead) to some miss-conceptions that had dangerous policy implications.<sup>3</sup>

So, the depth of the advice that modern American and British leaders receive has led to far more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics within Muslim communities and therefore, has helped to ensure that statements made by leaders in relation to (for example) attacks carried out in the name of Islam against targets in the West, are far more precise in their language.

Yet, it was not only ideological or geo-strategic considerations which underpinned British and US perceptions of Muslim states and diasporas. Economic considerations, especially oil, have also been a vital filter on the lens of US-British policymakers' perceptions of Islam and Muslims over the past century. A filter which did not exist in the Adams- Gladstone era.

Oil had been a developing market for some years. As far back as 1815 oil-gas had been used for street lighting in Britain, but it was the decision of Winston Churchill (in his then capacity of First Sea Lord) to switch the British navy to oil engines which really drove the need for oil in the UK. In America, the invention of the motor car, as well as the shift in shipping fuel-requirements had also prompted a sharp increase in oil imports. America had produced its own oil since the 1860s and had even exported some to Britain, but not in the kind of volume that was required. Consequently, the discovery of oil in Persia, and then the Gulf prompted a scramble by the erstwhile allies to secure the commodity for themselves.<sup>4</sup> It was the negotiation for these concessions which made Persian and Gulf leaders realise that they were able to wield more power than they had previously been able to and, as such, they were able to negotiate concessions which not only guaranteed the flow of wealth

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1 Teresa Thomas *American Arabists in the Cold War Middle East, 1946-75: From Orientalism to Professionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 17-18; Leslie McLoughlin, *In a Sea of Knowledge: British Arabists in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Ithaca Press, 2002) 27-31.

2 Thomas Arnold, "The Supposed Spiritual Authority of the Caliph", IOR/L/PS/10/853/4, (London, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1922)

3 Sean Oliver-Dee, *The Caliphate Question: British Government and Islamic Governance*, (Lanham(MD): Rowman and Littlefield, 2009) 163-172.

4 Ephraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery of the Middle East, 1789–1923*, (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2001) 133; Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 83-85.

into their countries, but also, ensured that infrastructure was paid for by the companies.<sup>1</sup> Some, like the Kuwaiti ruler, Sheikh Ahmad also negotiated the building of schools and hospitals. However, this was a two edged sword as it also raised the spectre of western liberal education influencing young people in the region.

This need for oil to power economic growth therefore became both a filter and frame within which perceptions of Islam in governments on both sides of the Atlantic were conceptualised. When this economic framing was coupled with the Cold War framework of Sunni Islam as the cohesive glue to provide a barrier against expanding Communism, the perceptions of Islam within the US and British governments became ultimately mediated through pragmatic necessity for positive relationship, rather than the oppositional exposure that had characterised the pre-twentieth century perceptions. For that reason, both the British and American governments redoubled their efforts to show that there was no hostility towards Islam. It was for that reason that exhibitions about Islam and the cultures of Muslim societies were put on in Washington DC and London, paid for by the respective governments. Indeed, it was not just exhibitions that were put on.<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1975 the US International Development Cooperation Agency funded and produced the film 'Islam: The Prophet and People' for public showing.<sup>3</sup>

These economic and strategic considerations have therefore added another dimension to the complex interactions between Muslims and US-British policymakers that have, in their turn, fed into the perceptions of Islam and Muslims this article has discussed.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has covered a number of geo-strategic dynamics and incidents, as well as personal reflections on Islam from a number of policymakers within the British and American policy elites. So, what conclusions can be woven from the threads of the incidents, personal reflections and dynamics discussed above?

There appear to be two consistent perceptions: firstly, that Islam is capable of being both a cohesive glue to bind societies together and a revolutionary ideology capable of completely disrupting foreign policy aims and goals. For the British, their experiences of Empire showed her both sides and that perception has carried into the post-9/11 world. In America, it was the Cold War which showed her this, both in relation to using cohesive Islamic societies as a bulwark against Communist expansionism, but also through the Iranian Revolution.

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1 Rupert Hay, 'The Impact of the Oil Industry on the Persian Gulf Shaykdoms', *Middle East Journal* (1955) 9, 361-392.

2 Barry Wood, "Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art", *Ars Orientalis* (2000) 30, 113-130.

3 U.S. International Development Cooperation Agency, 'Islam: The Prophet and People' (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1975) Local Identifier 286-740.

Secondly, that the perceptions of Islam and Muslims in the US-British policymaking elites, although influenced by their experiences, were actually heavily influenced by their internal cultural shifts over the past two hundred years. This has been partly driven by the impact of immigration, but perhaps more fundamentally, it has been driven by the shift in cultural values and the accompanying philosophical theories which drove and embedded this shift. For, over the course of the past four hundred years since the European Reformation, the perceptions of Islam amongst British (and later American) political elites were mediated through their own philosophical and cultural lens: moving from fear coupled with admiration in the Reformation period, to disdain under the impact of Enlightenment progressivism, to a nuanced and consciously judgement-less lens in the age of Post-Modernism and immigration.

The rise of China and the decline of oil will undoubtedly bring longer-term changes to the nature of the interactions between American and British policymakers and Muslims. But, as has this article has argued, it is more likely to be internal shifts in culture rather than the interactions alone that will govern how governments in the West see Islam, Muslim diasporas and states in the coming decades and centuries.

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