

## INTERVIEW WITH ALI ALLAWI

James Robertson 02-Jun-2009

For a man who rose through the notoriously tribal arena of Iraqi politics, Ali Allawi seems to have a penchant for striking out on his own. Minister for Defence and Finance in the post-invasion government, Allawi shot to fame in the West with *The Occupation of Iraq*, a critique of American mismanagement as well as his 'venal' political colleagues. Now retired from politics, Allawi has returned to academia as a Senior Visiting Fellow at Princeton, and written another provocative *j'accuse* – this one directed at the Muslim world.

James Robertson recently caught up with Allawi for *The Diplomat* to discuss what he calls 'The Crisis of Islamic Civilization', as Barack Obama prepares to visit the Middle East to deliver a major address redefining US relations with Islam.

### **Is there any longer such a thing as a cohesive Islamic civilisation?**

It appears to me that Islamic civilisation as a living, vital entity is losing whatever elan it had. But people still talk about the outer aspects of Islamic civilisation as being something substantial, particularly Muslims who have not yet recognised that their civilisation has been seriously degraded. They still think it has a vitality in all aspects of human life and culture. While in reality, Islamic civilisation is reduced to two aspects, namely the political and the religious, but the other aspects of it – the economic, the social, the cultural, the aesthetic – are no longer valid markers for Muslims.

### **Why is it in crisis?**

Irrespective of the material or technological state of Muslim societies prior to modernity, the outer forms – the laws, institutions and cultures – in which Muslims lived were basically indigenous. They reflected Muslims' authentic spiritual experiences. You had institutions, relationships, transactions, that were grounded in a certain way of looking at things. This aspect of Muslim civilisation has basically collapsed, so that when Muslims deal with the world they deal with something not defined by their inner precepts. Which causes, to my mind, a tension and sense of inadequacy when it comes to dealing with the modern world. It's not that the modern world is and of itself antithetical to Islamic values, or precepts.

### **For how long has this been the case?**

I bring it down to three different waves that have engulfed the Muslim world over the past two hundred years. The first: expansion of colonial Western powers into Islamic territory. The second is to do with aspects of modernisation or Westernisation that

challenged the Islamic perspective on life and values. And lastly, globalisation and the integration of key aspects of the Islamic world into the global order. These waves have engulfed it, and in none of these episodes has there been an authentic Islamic response. There has been resistance, and rejection, but in reality it has basically been a retreat.

**Why do you think Western or other alien frameworks were adopted so uncritically in the Muslim world?**

It's do with powerlessness, or the sense of retreat that Muslims feel when they confront a superior technological and material civilisation. They try to determine what the causes of that civilisation are and they try to emulate them, not recognising that these practices are related *sui generis* to that particular civilisation's approach to matters of production, power, technology etc., rather than an intuitive Islamic response. So, it's basically a capitulation to what is manifestly stronger, and seems to have produced material superiority.

**In your book you say 'Sharia did not leave much room for economics'. How alien is capitalism to the Islamic world-view?**

The Islamic way of looking at economic transactions is not so much in terms of the way that 19th century utilitarians looked at it, or the way that people are trying to confront the issues today. It is seen mainly in terms of what are acceptable norms for ethical transactions. It's a different way of understanding economics... We [once] had the possibility for creating a value-laden form of economic transaction in the Islamic banking movement, but that very soon capitulated to the contemporary or conventional form, and became attached to it.

**You've been a merchant banker in London. Have you found success in the West to be a spiritual challenge?**

Yes, yes it has. It's a very difficult question, but to be truthful (and I hope I always will be) I must say it has because the notion of success in Islam is so different to the notion of success in the material world. Success in Islam is about developing a relationship between the individual and the creator; about living a life that is governed by values that are rooted in a spiritual experience. This is success, not fame, fortune, or power. Islam doesn't deny that these exist, of course not, and it doesn't deny that these are probably the most important drivers of human action, but they are not the ideal drivers. There is a conundrum here.

**Is there an authentically Islamic program for democracy?**

As understood in the Western sense? I don't think so. There are certain underlying assumptions to the Western democratic experience, such as adversarial politics and embedded checks and balances. If you look at [implementing] these institutionally, then probably not. But if you ask whether politics in Islam trends towards the same objectives, such as fairness, justice, representation, access to decision makers etc., then yes, I think there is. But it will not be expressed in the same way or forms as a Western democracy. You have to do it in terms of Islam's own understanding of these values.

**Doesn't the electoral evidence from Muslim democracies show that voters are above all pragmatic and unlikely to move towards a more Islamic political system?**

Yes, I think so. But if what you want are the benefits of a liberal, democratic, technological order, then you have to say that the roots of that order do not lie in Islam, they lie in modernity, and the Western experience which led to modernity. So you, as a Muslim – as an individual it's a different story – no longer have anything of consequence

to say about how the world needs to be organised in order to reflect your inner condition. That's fine. But in time, I say, this will push Islam into a private faith; just another religion, or a personal relationship with the unseen. If you believe that Islam has a different cause, that the external world should be related to its inner, spiritual reality then you can't really accept the forms of modernity and shroud them in Islamic terminology. It should really be the other way round.

### **Is that what Muslim democrats are doing?**

Yes, that what the Muslim Democrats are all about. Anwar Ibrahim is in that category; the AK party in Turkey, too. Basically, they are saying that 'our job is to govern, and govern well'. And they have ideologies and philosophies drawn from what was originally Western, but is now called 'Universal', background. I have nothing against saying that these are workable international models that seem to deliver the goods. But please do not call them Islamic, because they're not. They are derived from a different experience.

### **You call for a 'new Islamic architecture' for human rights. Is pan-Islamic unity on such a contentious issue feasible?**

I think so. Obviously, the way that the Muslim world runs its human rights is not up to the standard of either the Universal/Western understanding of human rights, or in terms of Islam's own understanding of what should be the rights and duties associated with human beings. In most countries it is very poor, or even appalling. So, if you have a kind of common construct as to what constitutes the basic vision of a human being in Islam, and you build an architecture of rules, regulations and laws governing these things, then I think you'll end up with the same result, by and large, but expressed in different forms.

### **Regardless of whether it's philosophically possible, isn't the international community going to be suspicious about the ability of an Islamic system to comprehensively defend human rights?**

It depends on who is doing the talking. Muslims should theoretically believe that their world vision does have something to say about representativeness, justice, rights of groups, and that it should be expressed on their own terms. Whether everyone else accepts whether Sharia trends in that direction is really a non-issue. I don't think people in the West care what Muslims think about their laws. It is a failure of imagination to come up with a credible and workable alternative that addresses these concerns, while at the same time being an expression of the vital force of that civilisation.

### **Why do so many attempts at asserting a pan-Islamic perspective on the international stage break down?**

Well, I think because of the deep-rootedness of non-Islamic frame of mind, of institutions and also legacy systems that we are working with. It's very difficult to speak of a new financial bloc if all the relationships are of different economic systems, or different political orders. Although the sense that something needs to be done wafts over the Islamic world, this is in spite of certain inherited power relationships. In many cases this process has gone quite far. It is very difficult to think of a political unit outside of the nation-state, or an alternate economic order outside of the Bretton-Woods institutions.

### **How critical will Obama's troop withdrawal be for Iraqi security?**

Inside Iraq, I think we have gone beyond the need for a large American presence to act as a countervailing power to the other threats in the region. The central state is quite strong now, and able to meet direct challenges.

### **Strong enough to fill the boots of the American forces?**

They're being withdrawn from combat operations at a very rapid rate, so most of the policing work is already being done by the Iraqi army. There may be an increase in violence, but this will go down in time. The question is really whether regional political settlement accelerates quickly enough to stop a slip back into violence. I don't think we will see violence of the sort which we saw between 2005 and 2006, but it will still be an unstable country for some time.

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