

Security or Freedom First?

Stephen Schwartz

Center for Islamic Pluralism, Washington, DC

The commentator, head of an international moderate Muslim network, criticizes the “security first” concept as an expression of revived American isolationism based on miscomprehension of the Islamic world and the aims of lawful Islamists, ignorance of the conflicts within Islam, and lack of clarity on democracy.

Keywords: *democracy, Iraq, insurgency, takfir, Balkans*

I will begin my response to Professor Amitai Etzioni’s “security first” concept, as expressed in his book bearing the same title, with two caveats for the reader: I am not an academic, but a journalist and author, and I am deeply opposed to Etzioni’s arguments.

I am therefore all the more honored by the opportunity to comment on his work in a scholarly journal. I will not, however, write a detailed refutation of *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy*, but will limit myself to some general observations.

Security First seems to me flawed in many ways. I consider all of Etzioni’s discussion of Islam to be superficial and misleading, reflecting his apparent conviction that the world is universally divided between violent adherents of religions and ideologies and their nonviolent counterparts, among whom differences in practice, rather than principles, are of paramount importance.

The global community of Islam is not so divided, and to presume that it is leads one into the very trap that Etzioni tries to avoid when he condemns Westerners for “projecting Islam as a monolithic belief system that legitimizes and even extols the indiscriminate use of violence” (Etzioni, 2007, p. 135). Inaccurately reducing the Islamic global community, or *ummah*, to two elements—illiberal and violent and illiberal but nonviolent—reinforces, rather than answering, the claim that Islam is inherently illiberal. It is also simply incorrect.

Sunni Islam is now deeply fractured, not between adherents of violence and adherents of persuasion, who agree on basic doctrines, but between those who engage in *takfir* or excommunication of Muslims with whom they disagree, labeling them “unbelievers,” and those who follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad, who in a *hadith* (variously interpreted), cautioned Muslims against accusing one another of unbelief. Charges that Muslims had become unbelievers were rare through the centuries of classical Islam, although they figured in conflicts between Sunnis and Shias. After the emergence of Wahhabism in the 18th century C.E., and

the rise of the Mawdudist movement in India (later in Pakistan), the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Taliban, takfir has become a widespread phenomenon. But takfir is not, today, a religious interpretation; rather, it is a means of totalitarian political control.

Takfir takes several forms. It includes the early argumentation against Shias, the long history of Wahhabi aggression against Ottoman Islam and the Sufis as well as Shias, and the ideological propaganda of modern jihadists who seek the removal of Muslim governments on the grounds that by cooperating with the West the rulers of such regimes have become apostates. Takfiri violence is aimed more at Muslims who are willing to coexist with Christians and Jews than at the latter themselves.

Sunni Islam is therefore divided not between the violent and the nonviolent, but between exclusionist purifiers and traditional and modern pluralists. Etzioni has written extensively about Muslim “illiberal moderates,” even describing them as “the global swing vote.” The confection of the phrase “illiberal moderates,” from my perspective, violates a fundamental rule of politics: make distinctions, do not confuse them. Further, Etzioni has greatly exaggerated the influence of illiberals of any sort in the Muslim ummah. I would assert that the majority of the world’s Muslims, if not liberal according to Western dictionary definitions, are nonetheless pluralist, and therefore moderate. If they are not liberal they are, at least, “anti-illiberal.”

In addition, Islam also includes demonstrably liberal, pluralist, and moderate Muslims who do not reject defensive violence; the Bosnian Muslims provide the most notable such example. They created a regular army to defend their community against Serb invasion. Should their moderate Islamic tradition be rejected by Westerners for that reason? Should they have surrendered to the Serbs to prove their moderation? Muslim Bosnians today are discontented by the discourse of the international community ruling their country, which seeks to assign equal blame to them and to the Serbs in the bloodshed that took place there from 1992 to 1995. The same disaffection with the international community and its criterion of violence versus passivity is seen among Kosovar Albanians.

From the moderate Muslim viewpoint, all forms of takfir necessarily include within them the threat of violence; and for that reason the occurrence of violence in itself, if more immediate, is of secondary relevance. This holds for the claim by the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideological apologist, Sayyid Qutb (1906 to 1966) that Islam as it is generally practiced represents a fall back into *jahiliyyah*, or pre-Islamic ignorance. It is more obvious in the incitement of Saudi Wahhabi clerics to go north of the Saudi-Iraqi border to kill Shias, Sufis, and noncompliant Sunnis. To emphasize, the habit of calling Muslims unbelievers over differences in interpretation is recent in its broader appeal. For this reason, Muslim theologians representing many trends have called for a ban on takfir. That the majority of Sunnis already reject takfir is shown by Islamic life in countries from Morocco to Indonesia.

Political, psychological, or theological exclusion of the other, not violence per se, is the criterion by which modern societies, people, movements, and religious

phenomena should be understood. Takfir, even if it is, as we presently see, offered in democratic garb in a country like Egypt, implies exclusion of ordinary Muslims from Islam with violence against them as a predictable outcome.

For that reason I and others reject the posture now visible in the West, calling for accommodation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a democratic force because it seeks power through ballots rather than bullets. Professor Etzioni should reexamine, in this context, the statement of Daniel Pipes, “every fundamentalist Muslim, no matter how peaceable in his own behavior, is part of a murderous movement and is thus, in some fashion, a foot soldier in the war that bin Laden has launched against civilization” (Etzioni, 2007, p. 136). It has become something of a cliché that enemies of democracy (such as the German Nazis in 1933) can use democracy to destroy democracy. It would be much more useful to point out that no democracy has ever been created without first defeating the enemies of democracy and that permanent vigilance against the enemies of democracy is a requirement for the survival of democracy. Moderate totalitarians, whether fascist, leftist, or religious, remain totalitarians in their intentions, and they should be judged by their intentions, not their rhetoric. The enemies of democracy are primarily defined by their aims, and only secondarily by their practice.

The issues that must be addressed by U.S. policymakers at present are manifestly different, in my mind, from those addressed by Etzioni. Provably defensive violence is not the same as takfiri terrorism against ordinary Muslims. Pluralistic Islam is not the same as radicalism that has assumed a moderate costume for purposes of political advancement. It is better for the West to seek out and support the many Muslims who are pluralist, than Muslims who are illiberal moderates.

Etzioni makes a further error in equating Sunni fundamentalism or Shia radicalism with “strong” religiosity. Nobody would claim that Protestant fundamentalists are stronger in their beliefs than, for example, Mennonites. Nor is it logical to project that Latinist Catholics, who favor reintroduction of the Tridentine mass, are stronger in their beliefs than Croatian Catholics, who have attended a vernacular, Slavonic mass for hundreds of years. Few would commit the offense of declaring that Orthodox Jews are stronger believers than Conservative or Reform Jews; indeed, Reform Judaism views itself as an equally strong expression of Jewish tradition, not a dilution of it. In referring to Sunni fundamentalists or Shia extremists as nothing more than strong adherents of Islamic belief, Etzioni has erroneously credited the claims of the fundamentalists and other extremists to represent a purer or more faithful Islam.

This is not only a mistake; it is a gross insult to the moderate Muslim majority, which although appearing to be silent (thanks largely to Western media incompetence in reaching them), is just as strong in its religious belief as the fundamentalists, and sometimes much stronger. Researchers like me who have studied the lives of Wahhabi terrorists, including those who appear bent on self-destruction, observe that often the belief of the fundamentalist is not strong, but is weak, and that fundamentalism or radicalism provides the weak believer with an illusion of enhanced faith. The same characteristic has long been visible in Christian fundamentalism.

I have described only two among many misconceptions I find in Etzioni's book, having specifically to do with the struggle inside Islam. He has also presented events in Kosovo (which he refers to by the Serbian label Kosovo-Metohija, legitimating Serb claims to that territory), and elsewhere, in a confused and distorted way. Too much of his book is based on mediocre reportage and common wisdom and too little on serious study and analysis. In the art of politics, one should learn to anticipate, rather than merely react to, events.

Issues of principle in understanding democracy are also relevant here. I wholeheartedly oppose the view that the worldwide wave of democratization now visible, with all its difficulties and reverses, can be adequately described as nothing more than a U.S. policy option, gone right or wrong. I believe, rather, that regardless of the obstacles it faces, democracy is growing in the Muslim world and the lands of former and present state socialism, and continues to appear unexpectedly, notwithstanding the errors or the victories of U.S. leaders. Recent events in Burma, Ukraine and Pakistan show that the love of freedom is irrepressible, and that although I and others believe it better for the United States to actively support freedom movements, they will continue to be born and to resist oppression with or without American help. The progress of democracy is not simply an item of U.S. policy but an irresistible global phenomenon—it is, in reality, an international bourgeois transformation that was predictable given the information revolution and the emergence of a single world market. The role of the United States is properly to remove impediments to democratic developments abroad rather than, as in the media idiom, to impose democracy.

Etzioni has been lamentably quick to write off the new Iraq as a failure, to pronounce the Sunni insurgents (i.e. Wahhabi terrorists) in that country triumphant, to assume that radical Shia ideologues in Basra represent Iraqi Shiism in general, and, worst of all in my estimation, to completely ignore the slow but perceptible movement toward political reform that has been initiated by Saudi King Abdullah. I do not agree with his bleak and oblivious outlook on any of these matters.

Regarding the general concept of security first, I also dissent. Of course, as Professor Etzioni writes, life precedes liberty; and the preservation of life is seen by some as the highest priority. But we honor those who risk their lives for liberty and have seldom assured respect to those who surrender their liberty for their lives. A balance must be located between mere survival as a value and defense of freedom as a virtue. Islam counsels acceptance of forcible conversion by an individual to save his or her life no less than its much-debated concept of jihad as a struggle, including a military effort, to spread Islam.

I fear that the trope of security first conceals little more than a neo-isolationist appeal to an American political audience frightened by the sudden discovery on September 11, 2001, that in the global age the United States is not completely safe from external attack. Additionally, I observe that through most of its modern experience, America put freedom before peace, whereas the European powers put peace before freedom. This European perversity led to the threat of British and French

intervention on the side of the Confederacy in the American Civil War and to the abandonment of the Spanish Republic to its feral foes, in the late 1930s. Between those events as well as today, the world also saw creation of impotent international bodies like the League of Nations and United Nations, which, in prizing the tranquility of the status quo over the risks of liberation, has consigned whole populations to oppression.

Security first resembles a more palatable, but updated version of America First, the isolationist slogan of 1939 to 1941. Americans have become complacent with freedom because freedom apparently cannot be directly threatened inside the United States. I believe that freedom without peace is preferable to peace without freedom, and that security is meaningless without liberty. Countries without democracy are countries from which real security is absent because individual rights, accountability, and popular sovereignty can only be assured through democratic structures. To emphasize, freedom requires the defeat of its enemies. That is the primary lesson of the past two centuries, and it is, after a long delay, undergoing a new examination in the Muslim world since the lands of Islam are not territories of universal darkness. Many of these issues have previously and fruitfully been debated by Muslims, and they are being taken up again by acolytes of Islamic pluralism, not of illiberal moderation.

I believe the reaction of President George W. Bush and his advisers to 9/11—recognizing that the atrocities had occurred because the United States had indulged misrulers in the Muslim world, and that it was time for a fresh start beginning with Iraq, the most obvious target—was correct and will be vindicated. Notwithstanding the problems of Iraq, I never expected, while living through the 1950s to the first decade of the 21st century, to hear the ideal of democracy as a global ideal deprecated in the name of an illusory security.

I conclude this essay while observing the security–democracy crisis in Pakistan, a key country in the Muslim world. At the time of writing the situation in that country remains unpredictable. The military regime of Pervez Musharraf has survived since the shock of September 11 by telling Musharraf’s American interlocutors and supporters that the struggle for security outweighs the need for democracy. Yet Musharraf surrendered a major share of Pakistani territory to Taliban and other regional jihadists, has allowed Islamist infiltration to continue in the Pakistani army and intelligence establishment, and pardoned Abdul Qadeer Khan, who violated international norms on nuclear proliferation. Throughout this period Musharraf defied the national constitution. Given the historic concentration of terrorist activity in Afghanistan and the vulnerability of Pakistan’s nuclear and other military technology, all of these actions diminished the security of the democracies.

Defeat of the Taliban, removal of extremists from the Pakistani army and intelligence, and effective control of Pakistani weapons of mass destruction can best be assured by reinforcing political accountability through strengthening civil society in a democratic transition. The drama of Pakistan at the end of 2007 illustrates better than any theoretical construct the weakness of the security first concept and the priority of democratization.

Trust in the utility of authoritarian partners and expectation that totalitarian movements could escape the final judgments of history was discredited by the collapse of Soviet Communism as well as the positive achievements of U.S. policy in removing Marcos in the Philippines and Pinochet in Chile. Even as critics express disillusion with democracy in Iraq, new global fronts are opening, even in the Arab world, where the Iraqi experience has had good as well as bad effects.

Reference

Etzioni, A. (2007). *Security first: For a muscular, moral foreign policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Stephen Schwartz is executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism in Washington, DC, and author of the bestselling *The Two Faces of Islam: Saudi Fundamentalism and Its Role in Terrorism* (Doubleday). He is also author of *Sarajevo Rose: A Balkan Jewish Notebook*, published in the United States by Routledge Macmillan. He was a staff writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* for 10 years. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, his extensive and authoritative writings on the phenomenon of Wahhabism established him as one of the leading global experts on Islam, its internal divisions, and its relations with other faiths.