Toby Dodge, 'Globalisation, the Middle East and terrorism; rooting out the causes', *The World Today*, (Vol. 58, No. 3, March 2002).

Since the horrific attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre in United States of America on September 11th 2001 many thousands of words have been written in the western media about the relationship between Islam, the Middle East and globalization. Much of this has been of necessity quickly produced and speculative in nature. It has for the large part followed the lead given by former American Assistant Secretary of State James Rubin. Rubin, speaking on British television in the immediate aftermath of the assault, argued that this was not only a strike against America, but also an attack on civilisation itself. In targeting the World Trade Centre the perpetrators had attacked "… the centre of Western civilization where all the countries of the world trade in finance, industry, in all sorts of products." Proposed responses to this 'attack on civilisation' in the media, ranged from Salman Rushdie calling for "… the restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal – its depoliticisation …" to Niall Ferguson's call for a new and active American Imperialism based on the Mandate system set up in the immediate aftermath of World War One.

What is striking and on reflection disturbing about this reportage was the lack of any historical or sociological understanding deployed by the media pundits when discussing the issues at stake. In the rush to print and judgement it has proved all too easy to resort to clichéd stereotypes in the place of thoughtful and reasoned analysis. It is ironic that Samuel Huntington's 'clash of

civilisations' thesis, pilloried on publication as post-Cold War paranoia, served as supposed intellectual analysis in the aftermath of the twin towers attacks.

The tone of this analysis has been a hallmark of western reporting of the Middle East for at least the last thirty years. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979 with its anti-Western rhetoric and Islamic radicalism, the Middle East has become the *bête noire* of those trying to gauge the spread of globalization by identifying economic integration, 'zones of peace' and the growth of rationalistic liberal sentiment. The proclamation of a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for blasphemy by Ayatollah Khomeini was portrayed in Britain as a direct attack on the liberal traditions of humanism in the arts. The use of suicide bombing to expel Israel's army from southern Lebanon by Hizbullah, the collapse of Algeria into civil war, attacks on tourists by Islamic radicals in Egypt, the failure of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians and, finally, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan have all been cited as examples of a region constrained by the dominance of religion, untouched by the positive effects of globalization and the end of the Cold War. In spite of persuasive arguments that put the rise of Islamic radicalism in its sociological, historical and ultimately secular context, it is easier to play to dominant stereotypes that portrayed the Middle East as unchanging, irrational and dominated by Islam. A closer look at the region over the past 30 years, and especially since the end of the Cold War, shows states and societies struggling to deal with changing strategic, economic and political circumstances.

In equating civilisation with capitalism on the night of the attacks on America, James Rubin inadvertently highlighted the main issue at the heart of globalization and its effects on the Middle East. For the rise of Islamic radicalism and its export to the rest of the world is more persuasively explained by understanding, not the region's exclusion from the world economy, but the way it has been integrated into world markets and global politics.

The dominant economic model used by the republican states of the Middle East after independence relied heavily on socialist rhetoric and state intervention to drive development. Between the 1950s and 1973 regional oil-producing states managed to gain increasing control over the oil extracted from their territory. This gradually increased their political autonomy from their own populations and within the international economy. This process was dramatically accelerated by the oil price rises of 1973–4. Oil-rich states could in effect demobilize the political aspirations of their societies by generous welfare spending, by not levying taxes and by imposing political quiescence. This autonomy from domestic and international society spread to the non-oil-producing states of the region as either recipients of aid from the Gulf states or as exporters of cheap labour. Under these circumstances with states able to violently suppress or financially co-opt secular dissent, the mosque and Islamic charitable organisations became the only remnants of civil society that had not

been bought or broken by dictatorial regimes. It is hardly surprising then that rising resentment took a religious form.

The relative autonomy from global economic forces afforded to regional governments by oil wealth or inter-Arab aid and worker remittances were drastically reduced by the collapse of the oil price in the mid-1980s. This triggered a recession in the oil-producing states and a much harsher economic downturn among the non-oil-producers of the wider Middle East. Foreign aid shrank, workers' remittances declined and debt repayment began to increase sharply. Non-oil-producing states were forced to negotiate with international financial institutions like the World Bank and oil-producers had to cut budget deficits and raise capital from commercial banks. The drastic budget cuts that followed left the populations of the Middle East exposed to the harsh winds of economic uncertainty. The end of the Cold War also marked a steep decline in the political autonomy of leading states in the region. Syria, Iraq and South Yemen had all relied to a certain degree on the Soviet Union for arms supplies, diplomatic support and technology transfer. With the end of their Soviet patron these states felt increasingly vulnerable to US and UN pressure.

Against this historical background interpretations of globalization that originate in the Middle East see it not as a universal and multi-causal process but as the rejuvenation of Western, specifically American, dominance in the post-Cold War world. Globalization is seen to have brought in its wake greater vulnerability to

political and economic actors external to the region. Those activists in the Middle East deploying Islamic rhetoric to fight against globalization capitalised on the fact that the majority of the population have not seen an improvement in their economic situation over the last decade and may feel more insecure and vulnerable to the uncertainties of the market than they did in the immediate aftermath of independence. The social space the Islamists operate in and the support they garner are as much to do with the governmental policies of political repression and economic failure as they are to do with a desire to return to a re-imagined Islamic past.

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks 'Islam' was placed at the heart of the analysis key to explanations and hoped for solutions. It had according to a variety of pundits declared war against America, globalisation and civilisation itself. A much deeper historical perspective is needed for a more nuanced understanding of the causes and consequences of the September 11th attacks. In the Middle East in the run up to September 2001 globalization has had to interact with states in the midst of both financial and political crises. As a result unpopular regimes in the region have faced political opposition movements calling for a 'return' to Islamic forms of government and drawing their support from those sections of the population that have benefited least from the Middle East's interaction with global markets. This does not represent a set of societies or a culture seeking to avoid modernity but a population who have suffered from economic decline and political

mismanagement turning to those who appear to offer a political alternative to corruption and repression. The nature of political repression in the Middle East meant the mosque or religious charitable organisations offered the only vestige of civil society. They acted as one of the few areas within society not repressed or co-opted by the state. It is hardly surprising then that political opposition to the ruling regimes coalesced around those promoting a religious message. The United States, in building its coalition to fight global terrorism, has turned to the very states in the Middle East who have been the cause of economic failure and political suppression. In return for joining the coalition these states, personified by Egypt, have been granted further autonomy to ignore human and democratic rights. If the coalition built to eject Iraq from Kuwait is an historical guide then they will also be granted generous debt relief. In short America's war against terrorism may not tackle the root causes of the resentment that resulted in the attacks, it may even in the long run have added to them.

A longer version of this article has been published in Toby Dodge and Richard Higgott (eds), *Globalisation and the Middle East, Islam, Economy, Society and Politics*, (London and Washington, Royal Institute of International Affairs and Brookings Institutions, 2002).