Muslims and the West after September 11

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Injured innocence

"Why do they hate us?" asked George W. Bush. This rhetorical question betrays the pathetic ignorance of most Americans about the world around them. Moreover, its claim to injured innocence cannot withstand even the most cursory examination of US history. For almost forty years, this "naïveté and self-righteousness" has been challenged most determinedly by Noam Chomsky. As early as 1967, he pointed that the idea that "our" motives are pure and "our" actions benign is "nothing new in American intellectual history—or, for that matter, in the general history of imperialist apologia."

Muslim leaders have mirrored America's claim and have asked the same question of the West. They have had little to say about September 11 that makes sense to people outside their communities. Although they speak endlessly on rules of personal hygiene and "halal" or "haram," they cannot even tell us whether or not the suicide bombers violated Islamic laws. According to Dr. Taha Jabir Alalwani, chair of the Virginia-based (and largely Saudi-funded) Fiqh Council, "this kind of question needs a lot of research and we don't have that in our budget."

Fearful of backlash, most leaders of Muslim communities in the US, Canada, and Europe have responded in predictable ways to the Twin Towers' atrocity. They have proclaimed first, that Islam is a religion of peace; and second, that Islam was hijacked by fanatics on the September 11. They are wrong on both counts.

First, Islam—like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or any other religion—is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and its divine right to impose itself upon others. In medi eval times, both the Crusades and the Jihads were divine right to impose itself upon others. In medi eval times, both the Crusades and the Jihads were...
says that God created man from clay, and angels and genies from fire; so this highly placed engi- neer proposed to capture the genies and extract their energy. (The reader may wish to read the rather acrimonious public correspondence between Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmod and myself in 1988 on this subject, reproduced in my book Islam and Science—Religious Orthodoxy And The Battle For Rationality, published in 1991).

A brilliant past that vanished

Today’s sorry situation contrasts starkly with the Islam of yesteryear. Between the 9th and the 13th centuries - the Golden Age of Islam - the only people doing decent science, philosophy, or medicine were Muslims. For five straight centuries they alone kept the light of learning alight. Muslims not only preserved ancient learning, they also made substantial innovations and extensions. The loss of this tradition has proved tragic for Muslim peoples.

Science flourished in the Golden Age of Islam because there was within Islam a strong rationalist tradition, carried on by a group of Muslim thinkers known as the Mu'tazilis. This tradition stressed human dignity, strongly opposing the predestinarians who taught that everything was foreordained and that humans have no option but to surrender everything to Allah. While the Mu'tazilites held political power, knowledge grew. But in the twelfth century Muslim orthodoxy weakened, spearheaded by the cleric Imam Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali championed variation over reason, predestination over free will. He refuted the possibility of relativ- ing cause to effect, teaching that man cannot know or pre- dict what will happen; God alone can. He damned mathe- matics as against Islam, an instrument of the mind that weakened faith.

Islam choked in the vicelike grip of orthodoxy. No longer, as during the reign of the dynamic caliph Al-Mamum and the great Haroon Al-Rashid, would Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars gather and work together in the royal courts. It was the end of tolerance, intellect, and science in the Muslim world. The last great Muslim thinker, Abú al-Rahman ibn Khaldún, belonged to the 14th century.

Islam under Imperialism

Meanwhile, the rest of the world moved on. The Renaissance brought an explosion of scientific inquiry in the West. This owed much to Arab translations and other Muslim contributions, but that fact would matter little. Mercantile capitalism and technological progress drove Western coun- tries rapidly to colonize the Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco. Always brutal, at times gen- ocidal, it made clear, at least to a part of the Muslim elites, that they were paying a heavy price for not possessing the analytical tools of modern science and the social and political values of mod- ern culture - their colonizers' real source of power.

Despite widespread resistance from the ortho- dox, the logic of modernity found 19th century Muslim adherents. Modernizers such as Mohammed Abdur and Rashid Rida of Egypt, Sayyed Ahmad Khan of India, and Jamaluddin Afgani (who belonged everywhere) wished to adapt Islam to the times, to interpret the Qur'an in ways consistent with modern science, and to discard the Hadith (the traditions, or ways of the Prophet) in favour of the Qur'an. Others seized on the modern idea of the state. It is crucial to note that not a single 20th century Muslim nation- alist leader was a fundamentalist. Turkey’s Kemal Atatürk, Algeria’s Ahmed Ben Bella, Indonesia’s Sukarno, Pakistan’s Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Iran’s Mohammed Mosaddeq all sought to organise their societies on the basis of secular democratic values.

However, like other anti-colonial nationalist currents across the Third World, Muslim and Arab nationalism included the desire to control and use natural resources for nationalistic benefit. Conflict with Western greed was inevitable. Imperial inter- ests in Britain and later the United States feared independent nationalism. Anyone willing to col- laborate was preferred over otherwise conservative Islamic regimes like that of Saudi Arabia. In time, as Cold War pressures rose, nationalism became intolerable. In 1953, Mosaddeq of Iran was over- thrown in a CIA coup and replaced by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Britain targeted Nasser. Indonesia’s Sukarno was replaced by Suharto after a bloody coup that left a million dead.

Pressed from without, corrupt and incompetent from within, secular governments proved unable to defend national interests or to deliver social justice. As they failed they left a vacuum which Islamic religious movements grew to fill. After the fall of the Shah, Iran underwent a bloody revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq came to power in Pakistan for eleven hideous years and strove to Islamize both state and society. In Sudan, an Islamic state arose under Jaafar al-Nimeiry; amputation of hands and limbs became common. Decades ago the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was the most powerful Palestinian organization, and largely secular; after its defeat in 1982 in Beirut, it was largely eclipsed by Hamas, a fundamental- ist Muslim movement.

The lack of scruple and the pursuit of power by the United States too was fatal with this tide in the Muslim world in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. With Pakistan’s Zia-ul-Haq as America’s foremost ally, the CIA openly recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen, whom Ronald Reagan feted on the lawn of the White House, lavishly praising them as “brave freedom fighters challenging the Evil Empire.”

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States walked away from an Afghanistan in shamb- les, its own mission accomplished. The Taliban emerged; Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda made Afghanistan their base. Other groups of Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen, whom Ronald Reagan feted on the lawn of the White House, lavishly praising them as “brave freedom fighters challenging the Evil Empire.”

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Facing the future

What should thoughtful people infer from this whole narrative? I think the inferences are sever- al—and different for different protagonists. For Muslims, it is time to stop wallowing in self-pity: Muslims are not helpless victims of con- spiracies hatched by an all-powerful, malicious West. The fact is that the decline of Islamic great- ness took place long before the age of mercantile imperialism. The causes were essentially internal. Therefore Muslims must introspect, and ask what went wrong.

Muslims must recognise that their societies are far larger, more diverse and complex than the small homogenous tribal culture that existed in Arabia 1400 years ago. It is therefore time to renounce the idea that Islam can survive and prosper only in an Islamic state run according to Islamic sharia law. Muslims need a secular and democratic state that respects religious freedom and human rights. The power of Islam belongs to the people. This means confront- ing and rejecting the claim by orthodox Islamic scholars that in an Islamic state sovereignty does not belong to the people but, instead, to the vice- regents of Allah (Khalífat-ul-Arz) or Islamic jurists (Vilayat-e-Faqih). Muslims must not look towards the likes of bin Laden; such people have no real answer and can offer no real positive alternative. To glorify their terrorism is a hideous mistake—the unremitting slaughter of Shiites, Christians, and Ahmadis in their places of worship in Pakistan, and of other minorities in other Muslim countries, is proof that all terrorism is not about the revolt of the dispos- essed.

The United States too must confront bitter truths. It is a fact that the messages of George W. Bush and his ally Tony Blair failed the test of time. Bush and US policy-makers were unrepentant. A few years ago Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s U.S. national security adviser, was asked by the Paris weekly Nouvel Observateur whether in retrospect, given that “Islamic fundamentalism represents a world men- thology primer for the 700 years until September 11, 2001.

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