

THE SECULAR ROOTS OF RADICAL POLITICAL ISLAM

The author examines the interactions between the West and the Muslim world over time, trying to trace the development of political Islam and discovering how the West played a central role in this evolution. Critically analyzing the debate in the U.S. and American policies towards the Muslim world, the author concludes that the U.S. itself needs to be contained in order to prevent further mistakes.

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When the event we know as 9/11 happened, I was in New York City. As the weeks rolled by, and I read the American Press to try and make sense of the kind of debate that was developing, I was struck by reports that more and more Americans were going to bookshops to buy copies of the Koran to understand the motivation of those who hijacked the planes, and drove them into the Twin Towers. Soon the New York Times was telling us that the Koran was amongst one of the highest selling books in American bookshops.

After some time there was the American invasion of Afghanistan and then of Iraq. I wondered how many Afghanis and Iraqis were going to bookshops to buy copies of the Bible to gain an understanding into the motivation of those who were dropping bombs on them. Like others, I knew that President Bush claimed to have a direct connection with God and claimed to be inspired from above. And, yet, I somehow did not think that many Afghanis or Iraqis were going to the Bible to find a clue as to why America was bombing them. So I asked myself - why the difference.

The difference, I realized, was due to the nature of the public debate in the U.S.

Key intellectuals like Samuel Huntington at Harvard University and Bernard Lewis at Princeton University, even though they define opposite points of a debate, share a common ground which has come to be translated as “common sense” in the U.S. And that common sense is that there is a difference between Americans (or the West) and the rest, in particular Muslims. And the difference, it is claimed, is that you can read the politics of Muslims from their culture. That in America and the West culture is about creativity; that culture is historical in America and the West; that the attitude of Westerners towards their own culture is self-reflexive; that they separate out the good from the bad; they build on the good, they correct the bad; their culture develops historically. But it is said that for Muslims this is not the case. Except for a founding prophetic moment and some monuments, Muslims are simply born into a culture, and are said to live it like a destiny. They wear it as a badge; they suffer from it like a twitch; maybe a desert fever or a tropical fever. Their culture is not historical; they are condemned to live it and to pass it on from one generation to another. So Samuel Huntington argued that we are at the onset of “a clash of civilizations,” that the Cold War was a timid affair because it was a civil war inside the West - a parochial affair; that the real war, the war between civilizations, is coming, and at its core, this will be a war with Islam. And from this point of view there is no such person as a “good” Muslim: every Muslim is potentially bad.

Bernard Lewis disagreed. Lewis advised the American administration not to take on Islam and Muslims head on. He said that it was vital that the U.S. make a distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims and that it not confront Muslims directly but identify good Muslims, organize them, resource them, and get them to confront and quarantine the bad ones. The Iraq war was supposed to be a realization of this inspiration. It was said that once the bad Muslim was overthrown, the good ones would rise to the occasion, as indeed Eastern Europeans had done;

would garland American soldiers and that would be the dawn of democracy in Iraq. But, lo and behold, thousands of good Muslims seem to be turning bad overnight. Anybody who followed the public discussion in the U.S. about good and bad Muslims soon realized that good and bad were not adjectives describing the attitude of Muslims to Islam. They were actually adjectives describing the attitudes of Muslims to the West. They were not cultural adjectives; they were political adjectives. Simply put, a good Muslim was a pro-Western Muslim and a bad Muslim was an anti-Western Muslim I call this culture-talk. This culture-talk was self-serving; it was very convenient. It was convenient because it conveniently removed the U.S. from the picture; it conveniently explained politics as not the result of a relationship between two or more, but as the inevitable outcome of the culture of one party.

There was no doubt of the identity of those who had hit the World Trade Centre. There was no doubt of the existence of political Islam and there was no doubt of the existence of a particular tendency in political Islam which had embraced political violence as the way to change the world. There was no doubt of the existence of what is known as *jihadi* Islam. So was culture unimportant? I did not think so. What I thought I wanted to dispense with was not the notion of culture but the idea that the culture of some peoples is historical and of other peoples is not. I thought culture had to be understood historically. And I thought political thought, such as political Islam, also had to be understood historically. So I began to look at contemporary political Islam from roughly about the middle of the nineteenth century, and I found I could identify two major developments which were interesting from the point of view of anybody who stood on the morrow of 9/11. I began with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his encounter with Western colonialism, particularly in post-1857 India, and his claim that colonization from the outside was *prima facie* evidence of weakness on the inside; that to confront an external enemy required first confronting internal weaknesses. Al-Afghani thought the answer was to bring large masses of Muslims into the public arena to embrace politics. I was struck by a shift, a shift from the time of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the middle of the nineteenth century to a hundred years later through Mohammed Iqbal and Mohammed Ali Jinnah to Abul A'la Mawdudi because whereas Islamic political thought had been predominantly community-based, and had predominantly seen the community, the *umma*, as the driving force of change, a major shift had happened with Mawdudi. Mawdudi went from India to Pakistan, the Promised Land, and he was aghast that it was as banal as what he had left behind him; Pakistan was no more than a land with a Muslim majority; you could not tell it apart from India. Mawdudi lost confidence in the *umma*; Mawdudi lost confidence in changing society through expanding social participation and arrived at a statist project. He believed that to change society you had to first capture the state; that without an Islamist state and an Islamist constitution ordinary Muslims were beyond hope. They would have to be forced to become ideological Muslims. You could not leave it to them to do it themselves. I knew that Mawdudi had strongly influenced Sayyid Qutb in

Egypt, and I knew that Sayyid Qutb, even more than Mawdudi, was the standard bearer of radical political Islam.

Now, are we to understand Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb as part of a linear tradition called political Islam? Are we to accept Huntington's contention that the history of thought is best understood inside containers called civilizations; one Islamic, another Hindu, another Confucian? As I read Sayyid Qutb, particularly his book, *Signposts*, I was struck by the kinds of resonances it produced in a person like me who had come to political age in the 1960s. When I read the introduction to *Signposts* and I read Sayyid Qutb claim that he had written this for the Islamist vanguard, I thought I was reading Lenin's *What is to be Done*. And when I read the text and Sayyid Qutb's main argument that you must make a distinction between friends and enemies because with friends you use persuasion and with enemies you use force, I thought I was reading Mao Zedong on the correct handling of contradictions amongst the people. And I realized that neither Mawdudi nor Sayyid Qutb were religious intellectuals who had come either from the ulama or from the mullahs. They were both non-religious intellectuals; Mawdudi was a journalist; Sayyid Qutb was a literary critic. I realized in fact that many of the primary intellectuals of political Islam, contemporary political Islam, and perhaps contemporary political Hinduism, like political Zionism, are not religious intellectuals.

I wondered why it was so easy for non-religious intellectuals to come into the religious domain and realized we were dealing with a religion organized differently from Christianity. Historical Christianity since the Roman Empire, Catholicism, has been organized on the model of the Roman Empire; and Protestantism has been organized on the model of the nation state. There is a hierarchy, an institutionalized hierarchy of power inside the Church, which confronts the political hierarchy in the state and part of the question of secularism is the line of demarcation, the relationship, between two different powers, state and religious.

I realized that in Sunni Islam there was no such religious hierarchy. There was only the prayer leader. In spite of attempts by states to create a hierarchy from the top-down there really was not one; nor in Shi'a Islam until the creation of *vilayat-i-faqih* by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The more I read about Mawdudi's embrace of the state and Sayyid Qutb's distinction between friend and enemy, and began to look at the embrace of political violence, I realized that I could not understand either of these thinkers as simply the result of a linear development inside Islam. Both Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb were talking as much to Muslim intellectuals, who they were as critical of as they were of contending intellectuals from other modes of political thought. I thought particularly they were in competition with Marxism - Leninism. I knew that political violence was at the centre of the embrace of political modernity; that there had not been a century more violent than the twentieth century. I knew that since the French Revolution violence had been understood to be the midwife of

progress; Marx's famous dictum that revolution was the midwife of history. Romance with political violence was a sign of the times; it was shared by an entire generation of political activists and intellectuals; it was both secular and religious. And I thought this idea – that some intellectuals, because they were Muslim, or Hindu, or Confucian, did not live in the world but simply inside those containers called cultures – sounded more and more bogus. It sounded increasingly like the restatement of an old colonial idea, that the development of the West represents the Universal, in the face of which every other development is particular.

However, what of the gruesome embrace of political violence, the certainty that the only way to change the world was through violence? We can see the development of this mode of thinking if we trace the distinction between national liberation movements of the 1960s and terror. The national liberation movements made a clear distinction in theory between the civil and the military. They had codes of conduct for their cadres and guerillas which required them to respect civilian life and property, and which held them responsible for transgressing those codes. Whereas terror throws these distinctions overboard with such ease that anything but the target is simply collateral damage, the victim is no longer the target. It does not matter who the victim is.; the victim could as well have been chosen by lottery. Where did *this* come from? How did it get translated from an ideology to a political organization? How did this leap from the word to the deed take place?

Starting in 1975, the year of American defeat in Vietnam and the year of the collapse of the Portuguese empire, the centre of gravity of the Cold War shifted from South East Asia to Southern Africa as Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau became independent. It was also the year the powerful antiwar movement inside the U.S. reached its high point. It was clear the U.S. was not free to intervene militarily overseas any longer because there was a powerful antiwar movement at home. So when revolution broke out in Angola, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was convinced that militant nationalism was a proxy for the Soviet Union. Kissinger gave a pragmatic answer to this dilemma, if they could not intervene they would get others to intervene for them. They would intervene by proxy. And the proxy was apartheid South Africa. But the minute it was known that the white troops in Angola were South African, the intervention got discredited

In the next few years there were several other revolutions; there was the Nicaraguan revolution, the Sandinista revolution of 1979, and the Islamist revolution in Iran. The next year Ronald Reagan came to power. The Reagan administration was the pivotal point for the story that I wanted to understand, the pivotal point to understand the world we live in today, the pivotal point to understand the war on terror. Reagan made two claims which are now summed up as the Reagan Doctrine. The Reagan doctrine stated that America was preparing for the wrong war, a war in the plains of Europe against Soviet armies and tanks, a war which

was never going to take place. In the process, America was losing the war which was actually going on in the Third World, where Soviet proxies were coming to power one after another. Reagan's second claim was that peaceful coexistence was a code name for defeat and had to be thrown overboard. The Soviet Union was on a roll and the Soviet Union had to be rolled back.

The Reaganite point of view was put forth as an intellectual argument by Jeanne Kirkpatrick who wrote an article titled "Dictatorships and Double Standards" in *Commentary* magazine and then wrote a book by the same name. Kirkpatrick distinguished between two kinds of dictatorships: right-wing "authoritarian" and left-wing "totalitarian." She argued that right-wing dictatorships had been a product of history and were therefore historically legitimate. But left-wing dictatorships had been imposed from the outside and were therefore historically illegitimate. So authoritarian regimes could be reformed from within by internal political forces, but totalitarian regimes would have to be overthrown from the outside. Kirkpatrick's significance was that she made a moral and intellectual case for making friends with right-wing regimes while doing everything to overthrow left-wing regimes from without.

Reagan made another big change. That was to bring the language of religion into politics. In a speech before the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan dubbed the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." I think it is important to understand the political uses of the language of evil. The war against evil has to be a permanent war. You cannot coexist with evil. You must destroy evil or be destroyed. And in the fight against evil any alliance is permissible because nothing is worse than evil. You can hear echoes of the war on terror.

Using this highly moral language, Reagan established the most amoral of alliances. The first such alliance was with apartheid South Africa; the Reagan administration called it "constructive engagement." Under "constructive engagement," apartheid South Africa created Africa's first genuinely terrorist movement – *Renamo*, in Mozambique – genuinely terrorist in that it is the first such movement in the history of modern Africa which deliberately and mainly targeted civilians, bridges, roads, schools, health centers. There was no direct assistance from the Reagan administration to *Renamo*. *Renamo* had connections with right-wing organizations in the U.S. The role of official America was more political. It would have been impossible for apartheid South Africa to have nurtured from scratch a terrorist movement in an independent African country in an era of militant nationalism for over a decade without an American political umbrella. The political umbrella was crucial.

Mozambique was a laboratory in which the U.S. was more an understudy, where it learnt lessons which it then put into practice in Nicaragua. The Contras were a terrorist organization no different from *Renamo* and were openly set up by the Reagan administration. Through Presidential decrees, official funds were allocated

to the CIA, and Contras duplicated the tactics of *Renamo*. Therefore, It is worth noting two things: One is that terror is a strategy which the US embraced after being defeated by Vietnam; terror by proxies, terror through proxies, contracted terror. The other point to note is that Reagan had a habit of referring to the Contras as the moral equivalents of America's founding fathers. He did that on more than one occasion on American television and he used to refer to terror, the Contra terror, the terror in Angola, the terror in Mozambique, the terror that was to come in Afghanistan, as the spread of the democratic revolution. In its first phase this terror was not religious. Neither the Contras nor *Renamo* were religious movements; they were secular movements. The religious proxy comes into being with the last phase of the Cold War and that is the war in Afghanistan, the largest CIA operation during the Cold War and the longest war outside Soviet borders fought by Soviet troops in the history of the Soviet state.

A number of changes happened with Afghanistan. The first one was that the Reagan administration threw overboard the model of a national liberation movement; whereas *Renamo* and Contras mimicked national liberation movements. Just to claim to be national liberation movements, they had to be predominantly and mainly staffed by Mozambican nationals and Nicaraguan nationals. This was no longer the case in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the national liberation model was overthrown and instead it was displaced by the model of a religious liberation war, a jihad. The Reagan administration did not trust any nationalist organization. It did not trust nationalist Afghani organizations; it did not even trust nationalist Islamist organizations because it was afraid that since their objectives were Afghani they may conclude a peace with the Soviet Union; they may come to a compromise; they may go to the negotiating table. It looked for partners who had no interest in negotiations, who understood only one way of fighting, the gun. And it recruited not only Afghans but also what were called Arab-Afghans and others from a reservoir of a billion Muslims from around the world. All kinds of people were recruited; from those who joined out of religious conviction; to those who joined because they had nothing else to do; to those who joined out of adventure; to those who were criminals; to those who were psychopaths; to those who wished to do anything they desired under the name of the jihad and liberation, things which would otherwise land them in jail everywhere else. All kinds of people joined.

An entire network of schools was created to train these cadres. They were called *madrassas*, but they were a gross mutation of the historical *madrassa*. Often the curriculum of the *madrassa* was a joint enterprise between Americans, Saudis, and Pakistanis. I will give you an example from my book. USAID gave a grant of 50 million USD to the University of Nebraska to write textbooks for *madrassas*. Here is a question from a grade three mathematics textbook: "One group of *mujahideen* attack fifty Russian soldiers. In that attack twenty Russians are killed, how many Russians fled?" It's a simple question: $50-20=30$. The grade four textbook ups the ante: "The speed of a Kalashnikov bullet is 80 m. per second."

If a Russian is at a distance of 3200 m from a *mujahid* and that *mujahid* aims at the Russian's head, calculate how many seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian in the forehead." That is, 3200 divided by 800 = 4. But the question says much more.

It was said in these *madrassas* that Islam was not just a religion; it was a way of life. I wondered if any religion worth its salt would claim not to be a way of life.

Put differently, I wondered what it meant to say that it was not a mere religion but a way of life. And I remembered reading in Mawdudi's book, that Islam is a *din* just like communism. I thought what was being said here was not Islam is a religion, but that Islam is specifically an alternative to the state ideology in Afghanistan at the time.

We are at a difficult period in history. We have come out of a Cold War which was hot in the Third World. None of us should be lured or lulled by the term 'Cold War' to forget the hot wars, the militarization of the state, the destruction of ordinary lives that were the consequences of that war, the proxy wars waged in the Third World. The Soviet Union lost the Cold War and it was said that America won the Cold War. America also paid a price for winning that Cold War. Some of that can be seen today in the building of a national security state: an imperial Presidency with only nominal accountability to the legislature; a foreign policy that is made more by the department of defense than by the department of state; an executive that beats the drum on both sides, compromises state sovereignty overseas in the name of defending human rights, and compromises human rights at home in the name of defending state sovereignty. □

If containment is to have meaning today it will have to be the containment of the American state, and that containment, like containment in other historical periods, will have to be the work of those who suffer the consequences of that state. For the moment the cat's paw may reach out for areas and peoples called Muslim. But that is only for the moment. If we make any sense of what's going on in Iraq, part of that sense must surely be that all those smart enough to understand that they are next on the American agenda are smart enough to know that they better make a stand in Iraq rather than wait their turn. And they are smart enough to know that even if they do not have to make the stand in person, they can make the stand in other ways. That's the only way I can understand the tenacity of the resistance to the American occupation in Iraq, as a resistance national, regional and global.