

Making Of The Islamic Threat

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The London bombings have reinforced the Muslim stereotype of a bearded fanatic, carrying explosives in a rucksack, detesting the West (read “civilisation”). Islam is yet again branded as a religion incompatible with democracy and human and women’s rights. This Islamophobia, theorised as a clash of civilisations, gained currency with events that shook the world from Ground Zero to Bali and from Madrid to Beslan in Russia.

Huntington’s less read but widely cited book, Clash of Civilisations, reinforced this Islamophobia. Huntington warned against the easy assumption that we could relax after the collapse of the USSR: “The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilisations from each other.” Popular in academic circles in the West, his theories are also extensively quoted on jihadist websites.

Then there are Muslim apologists saying that there exist some bad guys, like Osama bin Laden who simply have misused Islam. The apologists present an analysis as superficial as that of Islamophobes.

Islam and Muslim societies have been as radical, or as reactionary, as the rest of the world. When the world got radicalised in the post-World War era, radical ideas spread across the Muslim world too. When extreme right ideas started finding an audience elsewhere in the post-Cold War era, they spread in the Muslim world too. In Europe, the far right found its expression in the likes of Georg Haider of Austria and Jean-Marie le Pen of France, in India it was the BJP. In the Muslim world it became Islamic fundamentalism.

The growth of Islamic fundamentalism since the collapse of the former Soviet Union is neither a proof of Islam’s incompatibility with civilisation nor a case of a debasement of Islam at the hands of some renegades. Islamic fundamentalism is a political movement and should not be confused with Islam. As a religion, Islam, like other religions, is not a static set of ideas. On the contrary, Islamic fundamentalism, like all other fundamentalist movements, is a reactionary, non-scientific movement aimed at rolling back the wheel of history.

Fundamentalism can be best defined as a counter-thesis of modernity. Eqbal Ahmad defines modernity as “a historical process” that “refers to the development of societies from one mode of production to another, in our age from an agrarian/pastoral mode to the capitalist/industrial mode of production.”

The shift from one to another mode of production demands drastic changes in human values and in relations between sexes, classes, individuals, families and communities. Thus, modernity generates a crisis of identity.

Europe went through this experience when capitalism was set in motion. It shifted the locus of labour from farm to factory. Individuals replaced the family as units of production. More and more women were drawn into the labour market. The focus of economic life was transformed from subsistence to mass production and consumerism. It all happened very fast. The culture could not change with the same pace. The fast-moving economic change threatened old values. It was an uncertain, transitory phase between tradition and modernity.

European fundamentalism (the Puritan Revolution, the Catholic counter-reformation) was an attempt for a return to the old order, an endeavour to roll back the wheel of history. Fundamentalists think this can be done through the practice of virtue.

The reformists (Protestant Reformation) endeavoured to preserve the best in their religion/culture, while adapting the requirements of modernity. There was yet another response to modernity that exhibited itself in a number of revolutions, starting from the French Revolution. The Muslim world came across this crisis with the advent of colonialism. The response to modernity was at first reformist: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Mufti Abduh, Ben Badis, Tahir al-Hadda and Abdel Aziz Taalbi.

The break from reformism came following the Russian revolution, as Mustafa Kemal abolished the caliphate in Turkey and established an uncompromisingly secular republic. No other Muslim country has so far equalled Kemal's radical break from tradition and separation of Islam from the state. An alternative emerged- the reformists and fundamentalists were sidelined. Sukarno was able to isolate Harakat-ul-Islam in Indonesia. Gamal Abdel Nasser was successful in sending the Muslim Brotherhood to partial, if not total, oblivion. The decades of the 1950s and 1960s witnessed revolutions in Iran (Mohammed Mossadeq) and Iraq (Abel Karim Qassem), the victorious war of Algerian independence, the abolition of monarchy in Libya, the Baath rise to power in Syria, the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and that of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's "socialist" PPP.

And what happened then? The Shah of Iran was brought back after a CIA-planned coup unseated Mossadeq. Qassem was murdered. Sukarno was overthrown and Suharto massacred one million members of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). Bhutto was sent to the gallows. The elimination of radical alternatives, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, created an ideological and political vacuum that was filled by the extreme right: Islamism (the Talibanism, Khomeniism and al-Qaeda). Islamism is nothing but a puritan politicisation of Islam in a period when radical ideas had been marginalised and terrorism became one of its violent expressions.

However, this Islamism has not fermented merely in the mosques of Egypt or the madrassahs of Pakistan, but also in solitary confinement cells, torture chambers and the environment of fear created by US-backed dictatorial regimes. It is nurtured by the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the continued occupation of Palestinian territories, and the presence of the US military in several Middle Eastern countries.

And the linking of Islam with political terrorism is no coincidence either. It is designed by Israeli-backed neo-conservatives in Washington to force a showdown with all sorts of resistance forces in the Muslim world (radicals, nationalists, Islamists, secularists). It is resistance, not Islamism that the US is trying to slander.

P.S.

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