

IS IT A WAR ON ISLAM?

by Pervez Hoodbhoy¹

Street opinion in Pakistan, and probably most Muslim countries, holds that Islam is the sole target of America's new wars. Even moderate Muslims are worried. The profiling of Muslims by the INS, the placing of Muslim states on the US register of rogues, and the blanket approval given to Israeli bulldozers as they level Palestinian neighborhoods appear dangerous indicators of a religious war. But Muslims undeservedly award themselves special status and imagine what is not true. America's goal goes much beyond subjugating inconsequential Muslim states. Instead it seeks to remake the world according to its needs, preference, and convenience. The war on Iraq is but the first step.

Aggressive militarism has been openly endorsed by America's corporate and political establishment. Mainstream commentators in the US press now argue that, given its awesome military might, American ambition has been insufficient. Max Boot, editor of the Wall Street Journal, writes that "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets". The Washington Post calls for an "imperialist revival" and the need for Americans to "impose their own institutions on disorderly ones". The Atlantic Monthly remarks that American policy makers should learn from the Greek, Roman, and British empires for tips on how to run American foreign policy.

Although many Americans still cling to the belief that their country's new unilateralism is no more than "injured innocence", and a natural response of any victim of terror, the Establishment does not suffer from such naivety. Empire has been part of the American way of life for a long time. The difference after 911 — and it is a significant one — is that America no longer

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sees need to battle for the hearts and minds of those it would dominate; there is no other superpower to whom the weak can turn. In today's Washington, a US-based diplomat recently confided to me, the United Nations has become a dirty word. International law is on the way to irrelevancy, except when it can be used to further US goals.

Still, none of this amounts to a war on Islam. Some will disagree. The fanatical hordes spilling out of Pakistan's madrassas imagine seeing Richard the Lion Hearted bearing down upon them. Sword in hand they pray to Allah to grant war and send the modern Saladin, one who can miraculously dodge cruise missiles and hurl them back to their launchers. On the other side, Christian-Jewish extremists, extending from the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons to the leaders of Israel's Likud, yearn for yet another crusade. They too are convinced that inter-civilizational religious war is not only inevitable but also desirable. Belief in final victory is, of course, never doubted by the faithful.

But the counter-evidence to a civilizational war is much stronger. Between 1945 and 2000 the US has fought 28 major, and countless minor, wars. Korea, Guatemala, Congo, Laos, Peru, Vietnam, Cambodia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia, and Iraq are only some of the countries which the US has bombed or invaded. The Vietnam War alone claimed a million lives. By comparison America's wars on Muslim states have been far less bloody. Iraqi deaths during the Gulf War, and the recent victims of bombing in Afghanistan, amount to fewer than 70 thousand. Even if one throws in casualties from the Israeli-Arab wars of 1967 and 1971 and attributes them to the US, Muslim deaths are only a few percent of the Vietnam War total.

Material self-interest, and not antipathy to Islam, has been the driving force behind US foreign policy. A list of America's Muslim foes and friends makes this crystal clear. America's foes during the 1950's and 1960's were secular nationalist leaders. Mohammed Mossadeq of Iran, who opposed Standard Oil's grab at Iran's oil resources, was removed by a CIA coup. Ahmed Sukarno of Indonesia, accused of being a communist, was removed by US

intervention and a resulting bloodbath that consumed about eight hundred thousand lives. Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, who had Islamic fundamentalists like Saiyyid Qutb publicly executed, fell foul of the US and Britain after the Suez Crisis. On the other hand, until very recently, America's friends were the sheikhs of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, all of whom practiced highly conservative forms of Islam but were the darlings of Western oil companies.

Nevertheless, Washington has occasionally misunderstood American self-interests — sometimes fatally so. “Mission myopia”, as the CIA now wanly admits, led to the network of global jihad in the early 1980's. With William Casey as CIA director, the largest covert operation in history was launched after Reagan signed the “National Security Decision Directive 166”, calling for American efforts to drive Soviet forces from Afghanistan “by all means available”. US counter-insurgency experts worked closely with the Pakistani ISI in bringing men and material from around the Arab world and beyond. All this is well known. Less known is the ideological help provided by US institutions, including universities.

Readers browsing through book bazaars in Rawalpindi and Peshawar can, even today, find textbooks written as part of the series underwritten by a USAID \$ 50 million grant to the University of Nebraska in the 1980's. These textbooks sought to counterbalance Marxism through creating enthusiasm in Islamic militancy. They exhorted Afghan children to “pluck out the eyes of the Soviet enemy and cut off his legs”. Years after the books were first printed they were approved by the Taliban for use in madrassas — a stamp of their ideological correctness.

The cost of America's mission myopia has been a staggering one. The network of Islamic militant organizations created primarily out of the need to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan did not disappear after the immediate goal was achieved but, instead, like any good military-industrial complex, grew from strength to strength. Nevertheless, until 11 September, US policy makers were unrepentant, even proud of their winning strategy. It took a

cataclysm to bring them down to earth.

But militant organizations have done far greater harm to Muslims, whose causes they claim to promote, than to those who they battle against. Killing tourists and bombing churches is the work of moral cretins and is not just cowardly and inhumane, but also a strategic disaster. Indeed, fanatical acts can sting the American colossus but never seriously hurt it. Though perfectly planned and executed, the 911 operation was a strategic blunder of colossal proportions. It vastly strengthened American militarism, gave Ariel Sharon the license to ethnically cleanse Palestine, and allowed state-sponsored pogroms of Muslims in Gujarat to get by with only a squeak of international condemnation.

The absence of a modern political culture and the weakness of Muslim civil society have long rendered Muslim states inconsequential players on the world stage. An encircled, enfeebled dictator is scarcely a threat to his neighbors as he struggles to save his skin. Tragically, Muslim leaders, out of fear and greed, publicly wring their hands but collude with the US and offer their territory for bases as it now bears down on Iraq. Significantly, no Muslim country has proposed an oil embargo or a serious boycott of American companies.

What, then, should be the strategy for all those who believe in a just world and are appalled by America's war on the weak? Vietnam, to my mind, offers the only viable model of resistance. A stern regard for morality, said their strategists, is the best defense of the weak. Even though B-52s were carpet-bombing his country, Ho Chi Minh did not call for hijacking airliners or blowing up buses. On the contrary the Vietnamese reached out to the American people, making a clear distinction between them and their government. By inviting media celebrities like Jane Fonda and Joan Baez, Vietnam generated enormous goodwill. On the other hand, can you imagine the consequences of Vietnam's leadership being with Osama bin Laden rather than Ho Chi Minh? That country would surely have been a radioactive wasteland, rather than the unique victor against imperialism.

Only a global peace movement that explicitly condemns terrorism against non-combatants can slow, and perhaps halt, George Bush's madly speeding chariot of war. Massive anti-war demonstrations in Washington, New York, London, Florence, and other western cities have brought out hundreds of thousands at a time. A sense of commitment to human principles and peace — not fear or fanaticism — impelled these demonstrators. But why are the streets of Islamabad, Cairo, Riyadh, Damascus, and Jakarta empty? Why do only fanatics demonstrate in our cities? Let us hang our heads in shame.