

## ISLAM, THE WEST AND THE WAR ON TERROR

*Amin Saikal*

It was in October 2001 that the United States and its allies launched a military campaign against the perpetrators of the worst terrorist attacks ever on the US. The campaign, which received widespread international support, marked the start of what President Bush called 'the war on terror'. Its objectives were to destroy Al Qaeda and its harbourer, the medievalist Islamic government of Taliban, in Afghanistan, and to make the world a better and safer place to live in. President Bush warned that the fight was going to be long, but would be directed only against that tiny minority who, as he put it, had 'hijacked' Islam for their extremist and barbaric ends. He expressed his respect for Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance, and assured Muslims, who constitute some 1.3 billion of world's population, that they had nothing to fear.

Since the start of the war on terror with 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime has certainly gone and Afghanistan has been put on a path of transformation from a theocratic past to a possibly democratic future. Al Qaeda has been dispersed from Afghanistan, with its presence in the country

considerably limited. And the US has invaded Iraq on the basis of a claim that Saddam Hussein's regime was linked to international terrorism and possessed weapons of mass destruction that threatened the security of America and its allies. No more terrorist attacks of any significance have occurred on American soil.

Yet no claim of victory can be made in the war on terror. The respective leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Mullah Mohammad Omar and Osama Bin Ladin, are still at large. Their networks' opposition activities have continued in Afghanistan at the cost of increasing American and Afghan troop casualties, especially since the start of 2005, although not on a scale seriously to threaten the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. Al Qaeda and its associated groups have managed to remain active, with some spectacular operations in different parts of the world, especially the Middle East, Europe and Southeast Asia. Iraq is in a mess, with the credibility of the Bush Administration and two of its staunchest allies, the British and Australian governments, in tatters as a result of mismanagement of post-Saddam Hussein situation in Iraq, and lack of evidence regarding the Iraqi WMD and links with international terrorism.

Many innocent people have been killed, injured, displaced and made destitute since the tragic events of 11 September 2001. Indeed, the number of civilians who have fallen victim to the war on terrorism in one form or another is estimated to be arguably many times more than the 2800 people killed in the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Since the start of the Iraq war, the Iraqi civilian

casualties alone are estimated to be well more than 100,000.<sup>1</sup> Against this, the US has to date (30 August 2005) sustained 2007 troops dead and 20,529 injured, with Iraqi military casualties amounting to many more. The number of American casualties does not include some 10,500 who have been disease casualties in the Iraqi theatre of operation.<sup>2</sup> With the Iraq carnage continuing unabated and with no end in sight, the usually upbeat US Secretary of Defence finally admitted on 12 February 2005 in Germany that the US cannot win the war on terror on its own. He stated: 'By now it must be clear that one nation cannot defeat the extremists alone... It will take the cooperation of many nations to stop the proliferation of dangerous weapons...and it surely takes a community of nations to gather intelligence about extremist networks, to break up financial support lines, or to apprehend suspected terrorists'. He appealed to America's European allies, many of which have remained highly critical of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the Bush Administration's unilateralist tendencies, to help the US to achieve its objectives in this respect.<sup>3</sup> He subsequently acknowledge that it might take up to 12 years to defeat the Iraqi insurgency and even then it would up to Iraqis to defeat it, not a responsibility of the US and some of its allies who created it in the first place. Yet the Bush Administration may not get any relief in the foreseeable future, for three main reasons.

One of the most distressing outcomes of the US policy behaviour is that many in the Arab/Muslim world have grown convinced that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Les Roberts, et.al., 'Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: Cluster sample survey', *The Lancet*, 29 October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Global Security.org, [http://globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq\\_casualties.htm](http://globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties.htm) (29/8/05)

<sup>3</sup> *BBC News*, 12 February 2005.

US and its allies have set out not only to punish Al Qaeda, but also to undermine Islam and penalise its followers in general. Despite his emphasis on the sanctity of Islam, President Bush has personally deployed biblical language to define the war on terror in terms of 'good vs. evil'. He has never failed to mix his personal devotion to Christian evangelism, America's power and rhetoric of democracy and liberty to convey a belief in the moral force of Christianity and invincibility of the US. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has gone so far as to declare Western civilisation to be superior to that of Islam, and several political and religious leaders and columnists in the US and elsewhere in the Christian world have made repeated disparaging remarks about Islam, the Prophet Mohammed, and Muslims as linked to terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

Well-known American political and religious figures, such as legislator Tom Santos and clerics Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have had no hesitation about taking up the cause. Some American academics, sympathetic to the Bush Administration have gone as far as to talk about 'the crisis of Islam', with a postulation that although at one time Muslims created a majestic civilisation, today they have reached a dead end.<sup>5</sup> This approach from the heights of politics to the plains of academia has generated a mindset and a climate in the US that has fanned an unprecedented wave of recrimination and suspicion towards Muslims. The draconian measures adopted in the US and its allies to profile many Arabs and Muslims as potential

---

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?*, London: Palgrave 2003, Ch. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003.

terrorists have simply reinforced the situation, causing growing anguish among Muslims, putting them on the defensive about their religion and religious identity.

In the process, key figures in the Bush Administration – specifically neo-conservatives and reborn Christians who have assumed a dominant ideological role in the Administration – have overlooked some of the more salient points about Islam as a religion advocating nothing less than virtuous living, peaceful co-existence and societal harmony. Some of the most important of these points are as follows.

The first is that Islam states clearly that there is no compulsion in religion, and opposes any form of discrimination and extremism against other revealed religions. Islam ordains its followers to respect all other revealed religions – Judaism and Christianity in particular – and follow Islam as the last religion, completing rather than contravening those religions.

The second is that Islam puts a very high premium on the sanctity of life as a gift from God. In Islam, it is only God who gives and takes life, and no one is permitted to engage in acts of killing innocent people or committing suicide. The Islamic concept of Jihad ('exertion') and 'self-sacrifice' has more benign meanings than the one generally portrayed in the West. Its main emphasis is on the greater Jihad – that is struggle against one's own evils rather than on the lesser Jihad involving acts of combative assertion on the part of Muslims. Even so, Islam endorses lesser Jihad and its entailing self-sacrifice only under special conditions and within set parameters. They are supposed to be conceptually defensive not offensive,

deployed only when Muslims religion or way of life or society are either seriously threatened or violated by outsiders. The same goes for Islamic notion of martyrdom, which is achieved only when a Muslim is killed in action by the enemy. Of course, not everybody is empowered in Islam to declare Jiahd, only those who have reached the highest stages of Ijtihad (independent reasoning) in commanding widespread Islamic respectability and following across the Muslim world.

The third is that Islam has a great deal in common with the two other main Abrahamic religions: Christianity and Judaism. It shares with those religions the same concept of God and His attributes, as well as notions of justice, piety, and moral and virtuous existence. Like the other two great religions, it calls for harmonious societal relations and just governance. Islam is not a passive religion, as it does provide for reconstruction and renewal, empowering its followers to act in self-defence against those who seek to destroy Islam either from within or from outside. But it delineates some clear boundaries within which acts of self-defence can be justifiable.

It is important to be reminded that Islam, like any religion or ideology – is open to a wide range of interpretations, although no interpretation can be embraceable if it undermines the religion as a doctrine for a just, virtuous, peaceful and fulfilling existence on earth as a prelude to heavenly life in the world hereafter.

Yet for Muslims to uphold their religion for the ‘common good’ and as a base for wider peaceful coexistence in the world, they require others to accord them the respect that their own religion demands of

them in relation to the followers of other religion. It has to be a two-way street, involving principles of mutual respect and robust reciprocity. Most Muslims believe that the West and general, and the US in particular have done little in this respect to inspire confidence in Muslims. Starting with the Crusades and European colonialism and finally the US's rise to globalism following World War II, the Muslim domain has been constantly subjected to suppression and humiliation. In recent times, this has been manifested nowhere more than in relation to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian lands, including Jerusalem – the third holiest city for Muslims – and the US's unqualified commitment to Israel, a commitment which has taken an enhanced dimension during the presidency of George W. Bush.

President Bush's description in mid-2002 of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon as a 'man of peace', and his decision to support him in reinvading Palestinian cities and using disproportionate force to suppress the Palestinians and maintain Israel's regional supremacy in whatever way necessary caused outrage in the Arab/Muslim world. He ignored the fact that Sharon was widely despised by Arabs and Muslims as nothing more than a man of violence and conflict, prominently on display in his public life for over half a century. Sharon's recent withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from Gaza may have generated some optimism, but it is not linked to an overall negotiated settlement of the Palestinian problem. The Israeli leader's concurrent reinforcement and expansion of larger Israeli settlements in the West Bank do not inspire much confidence about the future.

There have been 9,000 new settlers in the West Bank so far this year: more than the number who were withdrawn from Gaza.<sup>6</sup>

Based on various opinion polls, an impression has gripped many Muslims that their religion is often misrepresented and grievances ignored by Washington and some of its allies for no other reasons than to advance certain ideological and geopolitical objectives. The predominant view is that – no matter what – the Bush Administration is bent on a policy of globalist domination, with the aim of changing the world in the US image, with an emphasis on the moral and civilisational superiority of Christianity in alliance with predominantly religious Zionists. Many Muslims believe, rightly or wrongly, that there is a deliberate attempt, especially from the US and Israeli side, to paint Islam as a religion promoting violence, terrorism and anti-modernity rather than progress and peaceful co-existence, which have marked its historical existence.

The invasion of Iraq and the mishandling of its transformation, at the cost of destroying the Iraqi state and inflicting heavy casualties on the Iraqi civilian population, have reinforced a growing view among them that the US is a dangerous power. This has been instrumental in making a growing number of them, including many moderate Islamists who form the bulk of Muslim intellectuals and professionals - and whose cooperation is needed if the US wishes to rebuild bridges of understanding and trust with Muslims – to become amenable to radical Islamism. By the same token, some have even

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/4188216.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4188216.stm)

found it desirable to moderate their view of Bin Laden's extremism and to regard him as a source of dignity and salvation.

Dangerously enough, Bin Laden's opposition to the US and Israel as well as the US-backed dictatorial regimes in the Muslim world, and his call for the liberation of Muslim people and lands, now resonate with many Muslims. It is no wonder that President Bush's repeated assertions in support of morality, liberty and democracy have fallen on deaf ears in the Muslim world. Few Islamists now accord Washington the degree of political and moral respect that is needed to open their hearts and minds to the US. The despicable stories and pictures from Abu Gharib, Guantanamo Bay and Afghan prison camps have had an appallingly lasting impact on the minds of Muslims, as they have also disgusted civilised people everywhere. They have played right into the hands of radical Islamists and neo-fundamentalists in opposition to the US and its allies.

This is not to say that Muslim states do not interact with the US and its allies. They do, but this interaction is by and large through state-to-state relations. It is important to be reminded that many governments in Muslim countries are either authoritarian or concealed authoritarian in character. They do not have direct public mandates, and accommodate the US power out of political need and fear. In other words, while the US has leverage over most Arab/Muslim regimes, it has not been able to transform this leverage into popular influence in order to win the minds and hearts of their subjects. And while large numbers of Muslims support democracy, they do not want the US to impose it upon them. They view the Bush Administration's advocacy of democratisation in the Middle East as

motivated by a sense of self-righteousness and a determination to maintain America's regional dominance.

That is why, while many Muslim governments have quietly either supported or acquiesced in the US-led occupation of Iraq, a majority of Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia have opposed the occupation, with some of them actively lending financial and human support to the Iraqi resistance and sympathising with the causes and grievances voiced by Al Qaeda and its associated groups. Irrespective of the American view of the Iraqi resistance as 'terrorism', they see the resistance as a legitimate defence against what they perceive to be a constant experience of powerlessness and humiliation at the hands of the US and some its allies. Most are aware that the resistance and its operations also inflict casualties on Muslims from time to time.<sup>7</sup> But rightly or wrongly they have bought the argument that such casualties may be justifiable in support of wider causes to enable the Muslims to determine their life and destiny, free of interferences by the US and its allies.

Many Arabs/Muslims have come to view the Iraqi resistance and opposition to the US in the wider Muslim world as an expression of popular sentiment. From their perspective, this could eventually open the way for the demise of dictatorships and their replacement by

---

<sup>7</sup> See Jim Lobe, 'Gap Grows Between U.S., World Public Opinion', *Inter-Press Service*, 16 March 2004; Shiibley Telhami, 'Arab Public Opinion: A Survey in Six Countries', *San Jose Mercury*, 16 March 2003; Susan Page, 'Poll: Muslim countries, Europe question U.S. motives', *USA Today*, 24 June 2004; 'Poll: Majority of Muslims Think U.S. "Ruthless", "Arrogant"', IslamOnline.net(<http://www.islamonline.net/english/News/2002-02/27/artucke05.shtml>) 24 June 2004.

popular governments at home, and curtailment of American hegemonic involvement in their countries from abroad. They tend to view such an outcome as an important result of the Iraq conflict in shifting the power action from the authorities to the people for the first time in modern history.

With these developments, it is evident that the war on terror has lost its focus, and the relations between the world of Islam and the West – more specifically the United States – have grown tense, to say the least. Too many misperceptions and cross-purpose understandings have come to underline this development. The question is: What is there to be done to defuse the situation in support of better understanding and cooperation, and therefore the creation of a safer and more stable world?

It is important that the fate of world politics be wrested from the three minority extremist groups – Al Qaeda and its close associates from the Muslim side, elements of neo-conservatives and reborn Christians from the US side, and inflexible religious Zionists from the Israeli side – which have interactively emerged to shape the destiny of the mainstreams. The time has now come for representatives of mainstreams from all sides to become proactive to reach out to one another for more vigorous and wider dialogue and exchanges. This is crucial to restoring trust and building bridges, which have historically been instrumental in generating long periods of peaceful co-existence and cooperation between the West and the domain of Islam. In the West, concerned citizens need to become far more vocal and participatory than they have been to bring to bear civic pressure on their governments, especially in the US, Britain and Australia, to

recognise the futility of the reckless use of force as a means to solve most international problems. It is important that these authorities be made aware that the use of force against international terrorism can work only up to a point. Beyond that point the only way to deal with the phenomenon is to delegitimise the causes on which the terrorists draw to justify their actions and widen their circles of recruitment and operations. This can only be done if the root causes are prudently identified and addressed.

First of all it is imperative for the Bush Administration to acknowledge the futility of its approach to changing the Middle East according to its vision irrespective of what reality prevails on the ground. It should learn from history that every attempt to force change in the region from outside has ultimately resulted in failure. This was the case with the British efforts in the 1920s and with the American attempts in the 1950s. The British endeavours came to a crushing end with the post-World War II rise of radical Arab nationalism and the republican coup of 1958 in Iraq. The CIA's overthrow of the elected reformist government of Dr Mohammed Moassadeq in Iran in 1953 and its replacement with the pro-US Shah's dictatorship ended in a serious anti-Shah and anti-US backlash a quarter of century later, resulting in the Iranian revolution of 1978/79 that brought to power the radical Islamic regime of Ayatullah Khomeini.<sup>8</sup> From the consequences of this event the US has not recovered to the present day.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, New Jersey: Wiley, 2003; Amin Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, Princeton" Princeton University Press, 1980, Chs. 1-2 & 8.

If the US wants to help the people of the region, what it needs to do is to work *with* reformist, democratic forces to bring about favourable changes. It should give up its long-standing policy of talking about the virtues of democracy and liberty but supporting and protecting dictatorships whenever it suits it. The Bush Administration has more dictatorial regimes as its allies in the region than any of its predecessors. They range from regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to Musharraf's concealed military rule in Pakistan to Niazov's cult of personality Stalinist rule in Turkmenistan.

With regard to Iraq, the Bush Administration needs to end the occupation of the country on the basis of a two-pronged approach. One is to engage in direct negotiation for an end to hostilities with receptive elements of the Iraqi resistance, and open dialogue with Tehran and Damascus, which may have leverage with such elements in order to entice them to participate in the processes of a political settlement. Another is to promote an internal power-sharing arrangement not within a federalist structure, which is opposed by the Sunni Iraqis who view it as disadvantaging them and carrying the risk of territorial disintegration of Iraq, but rather within a unitary consociational democratic structure similar to what was once successfully in operation in Lebanon.

The third is to negotiate a clear timetable for troop withdrawals from the country, for under the conditions of occupation no Iraqi government would be able to achieve the degree of credibility and effectiveness which is necessary for bringing peace and reconstruction to Iraq. Of course, the US can only do this if it is also willing to abandon its long-standing goal of being the dominant

power in the Middle East. As such, it has to adhere to the recent assertion by the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that for sixty years the US sacrificed democracy in order to promote stability in the Middle East, but in the end it achieved neither, and therefore the time has now come to focus on democracy and live with its outcomes, even if they meant Islamic governments. The US Iraq policy and for that matter Middle East policy suffer from a terrible tension between the US rhetoric in support of democracy and its determination to maintain regional hegemony in support of its own interests and those of Israel. As long this remains the case, Washington will not be able either to disentangle itself from the Iraqi fiasco with a degree of honour or help to democratise the Muslim Middle East and empower its peoples to chart their own destiny. The US should become consistent in its preaching of moral and ethical values, and application of democracy and liberty as central objectives of its foreign policy. It cannot afford to be inconsistent in this respect, given the damage that it has caused to America's international credibility.

The second thing that the Bush Administration can do is to secure a viable settlement of the Palestinian problem and accelerate the process of Afghanistan's reconstruction. It needs to act on the principle of what is required to serve the cause of long-term stability and security of the Israelis, Palestinians and Afghans, as well as regional peace, rather than what might enhance short-term American geopolitical preferences, including control over Middle Eastern oil resources. In this respect, it needs to pressure Prime Minister Sharon to link its Gaza withdrawal to an overall settlement with the Palestinians, and President Musharraf of Pakistan to put his house in

order as rapidly as possible. While many believe that Afghanistan has been 'terrorism central', to the contrary, it is Pakistan that has been the epicentre of extremism and terrorism. Afghanistan has been the recipient of these phenomena from Pakistan. Despite its public partnership with the US in the war on terror - which has resulted in massive American economic and military aid to Pakistan and elevation of the country to the status of America's major non-NATO ally – the Musharraf Administration continues to help the Taliban and some of their Al Qaeda allies for wider regional strategic interests.

Beyond this, the US should spend a sizable amount on alleviating poverty and promoting the cause of critical and liberal education, and boosting cross-cultural understanding and inter-faith dialogue. On the issue engaging the Muslims, the Australian Government's convening of the recent summit of Islamic leaders in Canberra was a step in the right direction. But it would take a lot more than dialogue with a handpicked group of largely self-declared moderate Islamic leaders to persuade many Muslims in Australia or for that matter in any other Western country to unite behind those policies of their governments which they find deeply offensive.

To make such dialogues productive, the Australian Government, and for that matter its US and British counterparts, needs to do two things in order to promote them as part of a viable anti-terrorism strategy. One is to be inclusive in their approach, to talk not only to the agreeable, but also to confront the potentially threatening ones and establish a three-way exchange between the moderate and radical Islamists, and the government. Otherwise, the exclusion of

those identified as radicals can make them feel more marginalised and prone to underground activities. Another is to review some of government's relevant foreign policy priorities and actions, so as to deprive the potentially dangerous Islamists of the opportunity to widen their circles of support and recruitment. In the case of Australia, the Howard Government should be willing to review the impact of its close alliance with the US, and its Iraq and Middle East policies to see how much they are disillusioning and alienating many Australian Muslims from their government. There is not much point in burying one's head in the sand for the sake of self-pride and electoral purposes. At times national interests are served by overriding such purposes.

Finally, the US should devote more energy to building multi-lateral global support for these causes than on futile unilateralist efforts to change the world in the image of the United States. In other words, it should overhaul American foreign policy to restore its moral and political credibility as a constructive power in world politics, and to reconcile the interests of the US with the expectations of the wider world. These will constitute an opening which we need very badly if we want to change the world for the better. Otherwise, the prospects for an end to international terrorism and improvement in relations between the West, more importantly the US, and the world of Islam do not look bright in the foreseeable future.

*Amin Saikal is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (the Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University.*

