Against the Ideologists: A Bit of History

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"This is a war against Islam", Osama Bin Laden is reported to have said after the first US coalition bombings of Afghanistan. He has said that for a long time. He was and is fighting a war "for Islam", first against the Soviets, then other Afghan Mujahideen factions, and in recent years "the West".

This putative war between "Islam" and the "West" that is recycled these days in the media just as it appears to be enacted through suicidal hijackings and bombings of foreign countries is however a product of the fertile imaginations of "Islamic" and "western" ideologists. If this "clash of civilizations" has any history then it is very recent, perhaps dating to just before the Iranian revolution of 1979, in other words just over twenty years old. It is not a reversion to or postmodern re-enactment of battles in the medieval Mediterranean. An historical sense is necessary to appreciate that what appears like a fact of life, with a centuries old genealogy, is in fact an effect of contemporary developments.

What is nowadays forgotten is that "Islamism" was hardly the stuff of revolution and radicalism in the immediate post-1945 period. Decolonization mostly put in place elites disconnected from their people, and in the 1950s and 1960s many ideas were competing in which so-called fundamentalism was hardly a viable competitor. In those days there were a variety of right- and left-wing nationalisms fighting for hearts and minds. Secular Arab nationalism in the Middle East was the dominant discourse in Arab states especially after Colonel Nasser took power in Egypt in 1952. But even then it was republican and anti-monarchical, not anti-western. Nasser had genuinely hoped to get British and especially American support to build the Aswan High Dam. But because he made a few undiplomatic "socialist" sounding noises he was denied World Bank assistance. Then he proceeded to nationalise the Suez Canal in 1956 provoking Britain, France and Israel to attack Egypt. This is the only case in twentieth century history of an ex-colonial power (Britain) which had just departed returning to bomb its former possession. The United States government condemned

this attack and so did Russia. But it was only after this that Nasser turned to an aggressive Arab nationalism, embraced the Soviet Union and proceeded with "socialism" i.e. large-scale nationalization projects. As part of a great experiment in proving to the world that the "Arab nation" was truly united Syria and Egypt entered into a union in 1958 but this fell apart after a mere three years. Subsequent acts of formal political union, a favourite of Colonel Qaddafi, have all failed. The whole idea of "the Arab nation" is in fact a very modern notion having its more developed intellectual sources only in the inter-war years. Earlier versions under the lame old Ottoman Empire were simply for more Arab autonomy inside the Empire. Egyptian politicians insisted on an "Egyptian nationalism" and Nasser turned to an "Arab nationalism" rather late; Suez is that turning-point.

"Islam" was hardly a signifier of actual or even potential political power at all in those days. To limit the spread of secular, seemingly left-wing Arab nationalism King Faisal of Saudi Arabia began a "religious-offensive" through which the Saudis sponsored the propagation of conservative religion (certainly not "Islamic politics") throughout the so-called Arab and Muslim worlds. But the Saudis, since the very foundation of their state, have been well integrated with American economic power and British political guidance. While never formally controlled by an outside power it has demonstrated very little independence except very briefly in the oil embargo of 1973. But the seventies also witnessed the beginning of total domination of the Gulf states by the United States.

Thus it was pan-Arabism not so-called Islamic fundamentalism that drove Arab politics until the defeat of Arab armies in the June 1967 war against Israel. From then on there was a slow but gradual turn to Islam as a political ideology at universities and among the youth. To marginalize the Arab left and the Nasserists, President Sadat, used religion. He became known as the "believer president" while at same time opening the country to the capitalist West and negotiating with Israel.

While Israel was viewed as the villain on the doorstep of the Arabs it was also a convenient excuse to keep despotic rulers with huge military budgets in place. The logic of the rulers: first deal with the enemy outside then deal with internal political questions. Arab problems were externalized. But if Israel was used to legitimise

despotism at home then the Palestinians were hardly given a warm, comradely "socialist" or brotherly "Islamic" welcome, in most Arab states. The Palestinian tragedy is deepened by the Arab states' disregard for the rights of their Palestinian "guests"; so much then for the "Arab nation" and "Muslim bortherhood". The massacre by the Jordanian army of Palestinians in 1970 is only the most brutal expression of this; day-to-day humiliations continue from Cairo to Kuwait. The oil-rich states are prepared to throw money at the PLO and Hamas, and use highly skilled Palestinian labour, but Palestinians remain completely voiceless in these states.

The first modern "Islamic revolution" did not occur in an Arabic-speaking country but in a Persian land where the Muslims are mostly from the minority Shi'a sect. Apart from Syria the new revolutionary Iran had no friendly ties with any Arab state. Indeed, it was at war with Iraq for most of the 1980s. While the United States is rightly identified as having supported a repressive Saddam, the Arab, especially Gulf, states also heavily supported his secular Ba'athist regime. Ba'athism is a particularly virulent form of Arab nationalism whose major ideologue was a Syrian thinker Michel Aflaq. None of the other Arab states backing Saddam was Ba'athist but they even deployed conservative religious figures to produce arguments in favour of Saddam. Egypt sent about one million of its citizens to Iraq, labouring in various sectors of the economy and involved in the war effort. These states did this to see revolutionary Iran defeated and prevent it from successfully "exporting" its revolution in the region. However, in highly repressive Middle Eastern states the ideas of "Islamic" revolution spread. Secular government was authoritarian, Arab nationalism a failure. At home, battles were fought between young men fired by revolutionary religion and authoritarian governments, while Afghanistan presented a good setting for engaging in war.

But transnational revolution would never happen. Exporting revolution was very soon confined to the nation-state. The "Arab nation" was moribund but the "Islamic commonwealth" was not born. Hizbullah, despite being seen in the 1980s as the archetypal transnational shi'a movement backed by Iran and Syria, is in fact a Leabanese political movement with representatives in the Lebanese Parliament playing by the rules of secular electoral politics. It, of course, came to prominence in its fight to drive the Israelis out of southern Lebanon; an aim it achieved a few years

back. The same local focus applied to movements in Algeria, Egypt, Afghanistan and elsewhere. They were all directed internally, at their own states. Media images, however, can tie very different groups and issues into a seamless unity.

Where governments were undertaking "Islamization" programmes they were not done "against the West". Indeed, two most blatant cases of Islamization in the 1980s were Sudan and Pakistan while fully dependent on western aid, investment and military assistance. Both the governments of Nimeiri in Sudan and Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan were extremely unpopular but they professed piety and sought to implement the harshest versions of Islamic law. The former was overthrown in 1985 while on a visit to Washington, the later died in a mysterious plane crash in 1988. Both countries are still plagued by the legacies of authoritarian Islamization-from-above. Since the time of Nimeiri and Zia ul-Haq they have had uneven relations with western governments and aid agencies. Sudan was suddenly taken off the list of countries sponsoring terrorism at the end of September, and Pakistan has returned as a US client.

Modern states with big or majority Muslim populations have emerged under largely similar conditions to other Third World states. Religion is one factor, which only in very recent years has become a sign of potential political power, but even then the Islam-West polarity is meaningless. These states have the same problems as other Third World countries: huge military budgets; mostly undemocratic, unrepresentative governments; huge class inequalities: bloated and corrupt bureaucracies, high levels of unemployment, low literacy levels, disregard for the rights of women and so on. Ideologists of "Islam" are obsessed with the state and present their peculiar reading of religion to voiceless masses as the answer; those of "the West" see "Islam" as the cause of all problems and the enemy. Both need a bit of history.