



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Political Science

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF MUSLIM ALIENATION

KEY WORDS: Culture, Civilization, Confrontation, Capitalism, Coomunism.

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyse the growing alienation that has beset the Muslim community globally. Whether Muslims are in the West or Central Asia or South Asia, the general perception among the community has been anti west. Many of the problems can be trace to the process of modernization, westernization and the general failure of democracy. The dictators have had scant respect and by aligning to the western countries they have neglected the population, to their utter discomfiture.

Samuel P. Huntington's Prognosis on "The Clash of Civilizations" has provoked an in depth discussion in recent years than any other work in the field of international politics. He opined that since the end of the conflict between East and West, political and economic matters have diminished in importance, as has the ideological dispute between capitalism and communism. The world has now entered an era of cultural struggle, here wars, and confrontations are no longer the result of clashes between the individual nations. Rather they are by product of conflict between the seven or eight great civilizations of the earth - According to Huntington, one of the most important global fault lines in the twenty first century will run between Islam and the West.¹

Contemporary land scape informs us that there is a deep crisis in the relationship between the West and the Islamic world stretching from Morocco to Indonesia, and whose religious origins lie in the Arabian Near East.² The Iranian Revolution of 1979, wherein Ayatollah Khomeini Ousted Shah Reza Pahelvi, and founded an Islamic Republic, clearly had the ominous portends of a cultural antithesis of the West. Islamic Fundamentalism, with its adherence to the Quran and Islamic Law (Sharia) threatens the very fundamentals of the West's conviction that it holds the key to the progress of mankind.³ The use of archaic religions symbolism, and the increasing "re-Islamization" of middle eastern societies, which had been in the process of secularization, seems to undermine western ideas of the irreversibility of history and a "World Society" shaped by western culture. The Rushdie Affair, The Gulf War, The Algedan Crisis, Bosnian Conflict are indications of the resurgence of the 1300-year-old cultural conflict between the West and Islam.⁴

Islamic Fundamentalism has become a powerful social and political force in the last few decades, marginalizing modernists like Nasser Hamid Abu Zayad, the Egyptian scholar whose wife Ibtihal Yunus was forced to divorce him in 1993 for alleged heresy. Nevertheless, the swing of the oriental pendulum between secularism, orthodoxy, modernism and fundamentalism throughout the twentieth century illustrates that western and Islamic cultures are not divided worlds. Both are characterized by considerable cultural variety, which can provide the basis for cooperation, integration and dialogue, provided the forces of liberalism, cosmopolitanism and globalism are allowed to prevail. Here it would be right to assume that Samuel P. Huntington's fear of a clash of "Civilizations" is unfounded. Far more threatening than the purported incompatibility between Islam and the West is the increasing emphasis placed by many westerners and Muslims alike on cultural identity. Regardless of the problem inherent in defining essentialist concepts of civilization and culture, "Islam" and "The West" do exist as subjective, imaginary constructs, which influence the way each side perceives itself and the other.⁵

Islamic roots of Alienation

Political and military conflicts throughout the twentieth century has been a principal cause of alienation from the West, and have stoked fears of a western threat to the Islamic world. Defeat at the hands of Israel and its western allies in the 1967 six day war was a traumatic experience for the Arab world, which devalued the

ideology of Arab Nationalism and strengthened the forces of political Islam. The 1991 Gulf war was seen by many as revival of the crusades, despite the fact that a number of Islamic states joined the military alliance against Iraq.⁶ Western predominance in the near East, be it as colonial rulers or post colonial mandatory power as in "Palestine", has nurtured a historicist view of the crusades, whereby the orient of the middle ages is assigned the role of victim despite its positions of strength at the time. As a result, the serenity and fortitude which characterized Muslim reactions to the medieval crusaders, is reinterpreted as defensiveness. Such perceptions derive from the military, political and economic subordination of the Islamic world today.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc has spurred a pro-Islam form of nationalism in areas as diverse as central Asia, Chechnya and Bosnia Herzegovina. The process of Nation Building is so advanced in the near and Middle East and the North Africa, that a reinstatement of Islamic super nationalism, as in the times of Caliphate is out of question. Nevertheless, the social climate in most Islamic countries has been developing along conservative Islamic-traditionalist lines. Only a minority of Muslims support fundamentalism, but many have nativist leanings towards the traditional symbols, rites and customs of Islam.⁷ The number of mosques and attendance at them have been increasing in the last two decades. Headscarf and veil are once again part of the public image of the orient. The relative cosmopolitanism of the intelligentsia has been replaced by an introspection which emphasizes the distinctiveness and self sufficiency of Islamic culture. At the same time, the image of western culture in the orient has been severely undermined. Acknowledged western virtues such as scientific endeavour, scholarship, industriousness and enterprise continue to be eclipsed by the stereotypes of materialism, egoism, moral degeneration and the absence of community spirit.⁸ One can notice that the ethical and spiritual foundations of the West-Christianity, the Enlightenment and Humanism – are rapidly disappearing from the Islamic view of western modernity. The widespread perception among the Muslim masses is that of gross inhumanity. Thus one can find that the Saudi-Arabian royal family, to mention one example, has increased its Radio and Television empire in recent years in order to protect the Arab Islamic world from western corruption.⁹ Ideas like those of Rifaa-al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), the Arab historian who claimed that the West was a master of material things, while inner spirituality was the domain of the East, are also gaining popularity in Islamic world.

Flawed Cultural Stereotypes of Islam

In the industrialized countries of the West, Islamic fundamentalism and Muslim immigration have caused the old "Spectre of Islam" to resurface. In the 1950s a very different image of the orient as a positive and exotic place and as a centre of sophistication, splendour and sensuality prevailed. The West's view of Middle Eastern culture, as personified by the Shah of Persia and his wife Farah Diba, gradually deteriorated during the following decades. The Arab position on Israel, the Svez war, the Arab socialism of Nasser (1918-1970), Palestinian terrorism and the oil crisis all resulted in a revision of European and US perceptions of the orient.

It was no longer seen as earthly paradise, but as a dangerous Near East.¹⁰ The resurfacing of the Islamic menace at the end of the twentieth century represents the culmination of this new development. Media and Public opinion in the western world tend to perceive Islamic politics and culture through a prism of extremist groups and governments. The 1978/79 Iranian Revolution gave new relevance to entrenched European stereotypes of Islam as violent, fanatical, expansionist, and anti-progressive.

Despite growing fundamentalism, cultural conflict, between Islam and West is largely predicated on flawed inter-cultural communication than on cultural differences. The case of British Author Salman Rushdie, who was condemned to death, by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 for "Satanic Verses", was partly the result of distorted communication. The enormous outcry of western public and the media was a legitimate and necessary reaction, to Khomeini, who violated the most essential Human Rights, the protection of life and individual. However, public opinion in the West tended to consider the Rushdie Affair as evidence that humaneness and human rights are foreign to Islam. There is large scale ignorance of the fact that the Iranian Ayatollahs Fatwa (religious decree) is not binding even under Islamic Law, and that it was disregarded by all but the most extremist groups. In most countries of the Islamic world, public opinion supported the banning of the "Satanic Verses" – in itself an offence against freedom of speech – but seldom favoured the death sentence against Rushdie, yet like other western media, even reputable German newspapers described Islam as a "Sinister reality" and an "ideology of absolutism", following the declarations of the Fatwa. Reference was made to "fanatical Islamic countries", to the appalling spiritual chasm between "Christianity and Islam", and to the Millions of blood thirsty Muslims". The Rushdie affair has nurtured the old perceptions of a struggle between the Civilized West and Islamic barbarity, in which the West seems to resort to "fundamentalism of enlightenment."¹¹

The recent developments between the Islamic and the western world, is an increasing indicator of the fact that collective cultural identification is on the increase, at the cost of willingness to engage in inter-cultural dialogue. The notion of imaginary has been an important factor in foreign policy conflicts as, reference to the Gulf war in 1991, when Saddam Hussein called for an Islamic campaign, and exhortation of George Bush, calling for the containment of the "axis of evil". Negative and one-sided perceptions of Islam also affect the position of Muslim minorities living in the West public images of Muslim as fanatical and violent by nature reveal a dangerous congruence between mainstream ideas and rightwing xenophobic slogans, warning of "Muslim Immigrant Mobs" and "Islamic Infiltration". The perception of Muslims in the West appear to be shaped by a "collective extremism of perception"¹² which functions as a breeding ground for xenophobia. While the majority is not as willing as the racist minority to engage in violence, modern racism is "racism without races" and is based less on physical dominance than on cultural discrimination and cultural supremacy. It is this kind of biased and negative interpretation of Islamic culture that represents a threat to western Democracy's capacity to resist racism. The presence of Muslims is tolerated because general humanitarian principles require it, but in fact there is no cultural interaction between Muslims and Orientals. If hostility to Islam becomes a recognized norm, than there is clear indication that the multicultural society is in a mode of demise.

Islam and Violence

The Muslim orient of the late 20th century is generally depicted in the western mass media as an epicenter of dangerous eruptions of violence, for which, the religion professed by most of its inhabitants, i.e. Islam is held responsible. That this is so is not merely due to Eurocentric projections or the cultivation of hostile perceptions violence is indeed a characteristic of the Islamic orient. But is it first and foremost attributable to religious factors? A survey of the most important violent conflicts in the region does not corroborate this view, but points instead to authoritarian power structures¹³ as the main source of violence.

A profile of violence since 1945 in Near and Middle East brings to light four major conflict types:

1. Uprisings against foreign Rule: These include the bloody struggles against French colonial rule in Morocco (1952-65), Tunisia (1953) Algeria (1954-62) British rule in Egypt (1946-52), Palestine (1946-48) Palestinian resistance to Israel's occupation of West Jordan and Gaza strip (1967) Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89) and Chechnya (1994-1999).
2. Post-colonial military interventions by foreign powers: in particular, the British French Suez expedition (1956), the American military intervention in Lebanon (1958), Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89), American led war under the aegis of UNO in Iraq (1991), and multilateral military interventions in Lebanon (1982-84) and Somalia (1992-95) for humanitarian aid.
3. Violent conflicts between the Post colonial states of the region: in particular the major Arab-Israeli wars (1948-49, 1956, 1967, 1973), Pakistan and India (1948, 1965, 1971) Algeria and Morocco (1962/63), Somalia and Ethiopia (1964, 1977/78), North and South Yemen (1972, 1978/79), Iraq and Iran (1980-88), Iraq and Kuwait (1990/91) Armenia and Azerbaijan (1988) Turkey and Northern Cyprus (1974).
4. Internal conflicts within the Post-colonial states of the region: Domestic conflicts are at their most protracted and most bloody when they are linked with local and particularistic (i.e., ethno national, ethno religious, regionalist and tribal) loyalties and tensions. These are the Kurdish wars in Iran (1946, 79) Iraq (1961-1975, 1980-88) Turkey (1984) Black September in Jordan (1970/71), Sudan (1955, 1972, 1983), Lebanon (1975-1990), Oman (1967-1975), Pakistan (Baluchistan 1973-77), Sindh (1985), Somalia (1988).

The demarcation lines between the various conflict types are blurred and frequently overlap. In many cases conflicts reinforce one another. Struggle against foreign rule, for example, is a particular motif which permeates many inner and inter state conflicts in the region. Religious motives or a supposedly archaic willingness to engage in violence on the part of the local population are less significant than the effects of foreign rule: suppression, colonial conquests, human rights violations and social injustice continue to foster violent conflict not only in the Islamic world, but beyond.

Findings are more transparent when violence is measured by the number of victims. The greatest perpetrators of violence in the region are not nationalist guerilla groups or fundamentalist suicide commandos but authoritarian states with the potential to carryout mass annihilation and repression. Secularist dictatorships were responsible for the worst mass killings in the Muslim orient of the twentieth century: i.e. young Turks, for the massacre of Armenians, Syrian Baath party for Muslim Insurgents in Hama (1982) and the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein against Iraqi Kurds and Shia population. According to the findings of an international comparative study conducted at the University of Hawaii in the end of 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, measured by the number of killings, the intensity of political violence is determined less by religions, cultural, economic, social or geographical parameters, than by the absence of democratic structure. The more unlimited and uncontrolled the power of a political elite, the greater its willingness to kill and use violence.

Conclusion:

Thus, the relations between the Muslim world and the West are difficult and marked by mutual suspicion. This does not necessarily imply hostility, but each holds an image of the other that tends to be deeply critical, each factors its own prejudices and misconceptions, and each believes that the other poses a threat. From a European perspective, perceived threats include migration caused by rapid population growth and political instability at the other side of the Mediterranean, and political Islam, if not Islam Per se.

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