

Amin Saikal, "Islam and the West: Containing the Rage?" in *Islam and the West. Reflections from Australia* (eds. Shahram Akbarzadeh & Samina Yasmeen; Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005) 13-25

Terrorist attacks have caused many Muslims and Westerners to become profoundly wary of each other and to fear what may eventuate. They are unlikely to contain their anger towards each other and ensure a stable order in world politics unless they understand that their apprehension emanates from different bases.

The US declared its "war on terror" as not a war directed at Islam and Muslims *per se*. It taught that terrorists had hijacked Islam, though their actions had no justification in Islam. Shortly after September 11 both Washington and London also displayed an unprecedentedly firm commitment to securing a resolution of the Palestinian problem through the creation of a viable independent Palestinian state.

Views from the West

There are three kinds of views emanating from the US and its allies concerning Islam and Muslims:

1. Islam has been abused by terrorists and the resultant war on terror is non-religious, non-ethnic and non-racist (though George Bush did make the mistake of describing this war as a "crusade").
2. Western civilization is superior to Islamic civilization - so expressed by Italy's Silvio Berlusconi (though pressured to retract it), who wants the West to conquer Muslim peoples like it conquered communism, since Islamic countries do not respect human rights, especially religious and political rights.
3. Islam is a religion that inspires terrorism and produces terrorists. Saikal associates this view with US legislator Tom Lanto and prominent religious leaders, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Saikal observes that the US and its allies, in tightening up their security measures, have singled out Muslims, especially those from Arab backgrounds, for what he calls "discriminatory investigation and treatment" (15). He acknowledges that some al-Qaeda activists have been tracked down and possibly some terrorist attacks have been avoided through these measures. However, he observes that many innocent Muslims have been humiliated and human rights violated, contrary to the principles of liberal democracies. Consequently, Muslims have little regard for Washington's claim to respect the Islamic faith.

[It is notable here that Saikal has no advice to offer the US and its allies as to how to track down terrorists and stop terrorist attacks apart from such measures]

Saikal notes the diversity of Muslim reactions to these developments:

1. All Muslim governments denouncing terrorism and the killing of innocent people.
2. The majority of Muslims surveyed in nine Muslim countries in a Gallup Poll expressed their view that the US and Western nations did not respect Arabs nor Islamic culture or religion.
3. Frustration at the way in which the US and its allies avoid debating the main question: Why did the terrorists do it? That is, the West fails to understand the context of historical and contemporary causes that breeds such extremism.

Saikal expresses Muslim outrage at Bush's description of former Israeli PM Ariel Sharon as "a man of peace" [I might add, is this in the same bracket as his description of Islam as a religion of peace?], with Bush being perceived by Muslims as Sharon's puppet.

Muslim Attitudes

Saikal identifies four attitudes that have emerged to play a central part in reactions and debate in the Muslim domain about September 11 and its aftermath:

1. Moderate Islamists (most Muslim intellectuals and informed Muslims).
Characteristics:
 - a. See Islam as "a dynamic ideology of political and social transformation, and a meaningful ideology of opposition to authoritarian regimes at home" (17).
 - b. Emphasise the idea that there is no compulsion in religion.
 - c. Operate mainly within loose organizations, informal small groups and at individual levels.
 - d. Against violence (unless in self-defence) and, therefore, terrorism.
 - e. September 11 is seen as providing a dangerous incentive for the US and its allies to take the higher moral ground, deepen US dominance in the Muslim world and marginalize political Islam.
 - f. Open to modernity and interfaith dialogue.
 - g. Appreciative of the benefits of Western civilization, but critical of Western policy behaviour towards the Muslim world and arrogant claims of supremacy.
2. Radical Islamists. Characteristics:
 - a. Very puritanical and assertive in their political and social behaviour, especially striving for Shari'a to underpin the operation of the state.
 - b. Violence, at least in some circumstances, is a valid instrument.
 - c. May or may not be against modernity; but if they allow for it want it to be in accord with *their* religious values and practices.
 - d. Blame the West, especially the US (viewed as their most dangerous enemy), for the political, social and economic plight and cultural decay of Muslims everywhere.
3. Neo-Fundamentalists (Extremists, Ultra-Orthodox Traditionalists, e.g. Taliban militia, Wahhabi, Pakistan-based Brotherhood and Deobandi groups).
Characteristics:
 - a. Since text means more to them than context (mostly poorly educated), they adhere to a strict, literal interpretation of Islam, based on a particular school of thought emanating from particular Islamic scholars.
 - b. Some are "more puritanical, sectarian, self-righteous, single-minded, discriminatory, xenophobic and coercive in their approach than the radical Islamists".
 - c. Organic and organizational links have often developed between Neo-Fundamentalists and Radicals. Radicals often use Neo-Fundamentalists for human resources, protective purposes and outreach activities, including armed or terrorist operations.
4. Societal Islam (the bulk of ordinary Muslims). Characteristics:
 - a. A village-based attitude stemming from the grassroots of Muslim society, where knowledge of Islam is generally basic.
 - b. Apolitical or political depending on whether they feel their faith and way of life is threatened by hostile forces.

- c. Potential activists, vulnerable to manipulation by radical Islamists and neo-fundamentalists.

[I would observe here that, given the extremely small percentage of moderate Islamists and their lack of substantial influence on the majority of Muslims, Saikal's breakdown of the Muslim world seems very depressing]

Roots of Tension

Saikal sees tension between the Muslim world and the West as being rooted "in political and politically motivated perceptual differences" (19), which has led to an unprecedented level of fear and distrust between Western and Muslim entities.

The Iraq Conflict

Saikal claims Saddam Hussein's dictatorship enjoyed little popular support in Iraq and the Muslim world. He notes that Muslims are cynical about US' reasons for invading Iraq and sees its talk about establishing democracy and human rights in Iraq as nothing more than a gimmick - the real motivation being to maximize US and Israeli dominance.

The occupation of Iraq has galvanized support for al-Qaeda, with Bush's uncritical support for Sharon generating immense anger among Muslims. To build a better world the US needs to pursue three major objectives:

1. Resolve the Palestinian problem.
2. Empower the Iraqi people to determine their own future under UN supervision.
3. Rebuild and secure Afghanistan as the frontline against terrorism and help reform neighbouring Pakistan.

Saikal begins the article by indicating the need of both the Muslim and Western worlds to contain their anger towards one another. However, the article is almost completely one-sided, concentrating almost exclusively on the anger of Muslims towards the West, which Saikal appears to regard as fully warranted. There is no doubt that the West, and especially the US, have made monumental errors in foreign policy and has contributed to developing the historical context in which extremism has arisen. Yet, there is not a hint of self-criticism in this article, no suggestion that Islam and Muslims themselves have contributed in major ways to the tensions between the Muslim and Western worlds. He even seems to suggest that extremist terrorist actions, such as those perpetrated by al-Qaeda, are really all the West's fault - a strange conclusion indeed!