

## INTRODUCTION

### POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDEALS

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It has been two years since the first edition of this book was first published. The salience of Islam has not waned nor have the prophecies about the inevitable civilizational clash between Islamist groups and the West. The situation in Iraq is now reduced to a battle between US-led forces supporting the Maliki government on the one hand and an unlikely coalition of Shiite and Al-Qaeda inspired resistant groups on the other. This opposition has been used in Western media to reinforce the message that the conflict in Iraq, like Afghanistan before it, is not only a security issue but also a battle of ideals. Perhaps the most enduring aspect of the post September 11 intellectual debates is that we are now seeing a more pronounced struggle for knowledge construction and interpretation between two diametrically opposed schools of thought.

The first more vocal group argues that 'it has become clear since September 11 that we are faced with a new form of struggle that threatens to dissolve the boundaries of the political in liberal democracies' and that 'the attacks [of September 11]...indicate a new political and military phenomenon which challenges the framework of state-centric politics'<sup>1</sup>. This quote from Benhabib reminds us of Huntington who famously wrote: "It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future"<sup>2</sup>. Huntington, Benhabib and others such as Bernard Lewis<sup>3</sup> argue that the various conflicts in the Middle East can not and should not be viewed in terms of a neo-colonial or imperialist lens as many have argued. In fact, Benhabib draws a clear

distinction between the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation and that of other colonised nations that fought Western colonialism such as Algeria and Egypt. The point Benhabib and others are trying to make is that the struggle between Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and some Western governments is akin to the struggle between fascism and liberal democratic countries during the two world wars of the twentieth century.

The second group that includes the likes of Susan Sontag, Fred Jameson, Slavoj Žižek,<sup>4</sup> have emphasized the role of Western imperialism and hegemony, in the current quagmire that is the Middle East. The key argument here is that history must be factored in as a key dimension of what is unfolding in the greater Middle East not only in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in relation to the central Palestinian question. The daily violence in various parts of the Middle East manifested as it is in suicide bombers, inter-ethnic and inter-sectarian violence is not the source of the political and security problems but rather symptoms of a much deeper malaise.

The failure to improve the situation in Iraq is a reminder that the removal of Saddam Hussein and his authoritarian regime was not the magic wand that we were led to believe. In fact, the situation in Iraq today is arguably a lot direr than it was prior to the US-led invasion. Similarly, the ongoing instability in Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban as a reinvigorated resistance movement is also an indication that military intervention may no longer be sufficient to bring about basic political reform let alone ambitious nation building.

As Tariq Modood<sup>5</sup> argues, it is crucial that the ongoing conflict in the Middle East be divorced from the terminology and framework introduced by the likes of Huntington, Benhabib and Lewis. This is all the more important in the context of Muslims living in the West and struggling to reconcile the contradictory narratives about their identity and belonging.

The current crises, however, should not mask some unintended positive signs that are starting to emerge both across the Muslim works and among Muslim Diaspora communities living in the West. In many Muslim societies today, one is heartened to hear about debates about Islam as a theological system as opposed to Islam the basis for political ideologies. There are new publications that are proposing to revisit the challenging debate around interpretation and methodological approaches to the Islamic textual sources.<sup>6</sup> This is a clear indication that the role of centralised religious leadership is now being questioned and that the sources of interpretation and knowledge construction are being broadened. Of course, the parameters of such renewed efforts to interpret religious texts are

ultimately constrained by the subject matter and the domains within which new interpretation is to be applied.

At the level of Muslim communities living in the West, these new interpretations of what it means to be both Muslim and Western are also generating new articulations of cultural and religious identity. Muslim scholars, most notably Tariq Ramadan, Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na'im and Khaled Abou El Fadl, have argued for a major rethinking of what it means to be a Muslim in the West by breaking free of the traditionalist mould that divided the world between dar ul-Islam and dar ul-harb. This binary thinking which divided the world into two distinct realms of Islam and disbelief, Ramadan argues, represented the realities of early Islam, some thirteen-fourteen centuries ago. In this worldview, political authority outside the Muslim world was considered illegitimate and un-deserving of Muslim loyalty. Only the rule of the Caliph enjoyed political legitimacy. This was a black and white view of the world. There were attempts by later Islamic jurists to introduce areas of grey into this picture to account for trade and diplomatic links that were developing between the domain of Islam and the outside world. The concept of dar ul-ahd, the abode of treaty, was to accommodate this reality. The grey zone of dar ul-hud, the authority of non-Muslim rulers is still illegitimate, but Muslims travelling in non-Muslim lands (mostly merchants) need not engage in open warfare if their life and property was safe. Experiencing dar ul-ahd was always conceived as temporary and transient, as no believer of Islam was expected to live under non-Muslim rule. In other words, as Ramadan points out, the addition of this new grey area to the classical Islamic worldview did not challenge the binary division of humanity. It simply reconfirmed it.<sup>7</sup>

Population mobility and the settlement of Muslims in the West present a challenge to the binary divisions of classical Islamic jurists, as well as the Huntingtongesque approach to 'civilizations'. The United States, Canada, Europe and Australia are now home to sizable Muslim minorities. These communities are not transient. Some are into their third and fourth generation. Muslims in the West live permanently (even prosper) under non-Muslim rule. This experience clearly breaks the conventional mould. So what kind of the theological approach can explain the new reality of the 21st Century?

How can a practicing pious Muslim be a good citizen in a Western society that is governed by the secular rule of non-Muslims? Ramadan's response to this question is instructive. Rather than being fixated on the letter of Islamic text, Muslims need to explore the meaning and the inherent principles that are being conveyed in the text. This interpretive

approach to Islam allows for core values and ethical standards to be highlighted, values that are arguably timeless and go to the heart of humanity. The thirst for justice, dignity and equality may be articulated in different forms in different cultures and traditions – but the essence remains relevant to all. Highlighting this common bond of humanity is an important aspect of bringing Islamic jurisprudence in line with reality. The great majority of Muslims in the West instinctively grasp this and live their lives as true believers and good citizens. There is nothing inherently contradictory between praying to God at a mosque and obeying secular laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Benhabib, S. (2001) '*Unholy Politics*'. Essay, forthcoming in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Huntington, S (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Shuster: New York.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, B. (2002), *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Sontag, S (2001), *The New Yorker*; Fred Jameson, *The London Review*; Zizek, S. (2001), "The Desert of the Real. Is this the End of Fantasy?" *In These Times*, October 29.

<sup>5</sup> Modood, T. (2001), *The Observer* (London) newspaper website on 30 September.

<sup>6</sup> Ramadan T (2004), *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Ramadan T (2004), *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p.66