
THE SYDNEY PAPERS

Vol. 6 No. 3

Winter 1994

Published by The Sydney Institute Publications Pty. Limited

The Sydney Papers

Editor-in-Chief: Gerard Henderson

Editor: Anne Henderson

Production Assistants: Astrid Campbell

Linda Tellis



Photo – David Karonidis

Martin Kramer

Martin Kramer, Associate Director of the Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University and an expert on modern Arab politics and contemporary Islam, is well qualified to assess the impact of fundamentalism on both sides of the Middle East Peace process. Martin Kramer addressed The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 31 May 1994.

FUNDAMENTALISM

AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Martin Kramer

Last summer, at Columbia University in New York, a conference met under the title "Under Siege: Islam and Democracy". I was intrigued by the opening sentence of the invitation; it went like this:

A gathering atmosphere of crisis, most recently fuelled by reactions to the bombing of the World Trade Centre, has stimulated in this country a sense of confrontation between Islam and democracy.

Now what struck me about this sentence was the assertion that the *reactions* to the bombing, and not the bombing itself, had stimulated the "sense of confrontation". At that conference, one could have heard a long list of authorities on Islam tell a New York audience that if massive car bombs were going off under their feet, they had to understand why: they had only to look to the policy of their government, for not withdrawing its support from regimes that faced Islamic opposition. In the language of the invitation, this would "dispel some part of this crisis atmosphere and contribute to a *modus vivendi* between Islam and the West". Now that the bombers have received 240 year sentences, one wonders whether their verdicts are going to be criticised for again stimulating the "sense of confrontation".

In fact this constitutes an intellectual dodge of the fact that a part of Islam and the West see the world from more opposed angles than at any time in recent history, that their interests are diverging ever more often, and that their confrontation is not imagined but real. What I hope to do this evening is to examine the "challenge of Islam" not as a figment of Western imagination or prejudice. It is a challenge that some Muslims themselves have issued to the West, whether the West acknowledges it or not.

This is not the first such challenge. For a millennium, Islam represented the nearest "other", perceived as the paramount threat to what was then called Christendom. From the 7th to the 17th century, there was always some part of Western Christendom which felt vulnerable to Islamic conquest, and the successes of Islam posed a continuous threat to the security and confidence of Christendom. Almost in the instant after its birth, Islam overwhelmed the lands of

Eastern Christianity, and its raiding parties reached as far as the gates of Rome and the Alpine passes. When the balance of power stabilised, Islam still had footholds on both ends of Europe, in Iberia and the Balkans. The perception of threat diminished only gradually, over many centuries. The fall of Muslim Granada in 1492 allowed the Western reaches of Christendom to breathe easier. But it was not until the Ottoman failure at the gates of Vienna in 1683 that the West ceased to feel threatened by Islam. After that, of course, the tide turned dramatically. The frontiers of Islam began to shrink, the economies of Islam began to wilt. In 1798, Napoleon landed in Egypt, and over the next 150 years, the West rolled up the carpet of Islam. Despite the spread of political independence since the Second World War, Islam has yet to recover its own balance and confidence.

At first glance Islam is not up to a new challenge. The Islamic world is probably the most dependent zone in the world. Only about ten per cent of the trade of Islamic countries is done within Islam. For purposes of comparison, proportions of total intraregional trade are around 60 per cent in Europe, 37 per cent in East Asia and 36 per cent in North America. Other regions form increasingly effective trade blocs, while the Muslim world remains locked in a cycle of dependency on the West. Islam depends for everything from arms to cars to food on the unbelievers. A fundamentalist figure complained recently that even the *ihram*, the pure white gown worn by the devout Muslim pilgrim on his entry to the Holy Ka'ba in Mecca, is today imported from Japan; the *sajada*, the prayer rug, is usually made in China. What do Muslims sell one another? Half of their paltry intraregional trade is in oil and gas; the rest is other raw materials. All finished products and industrial goods come from the outside.

Once Islam was rich and led the world in science. It sat astride the great trade routes; its agriculture, commerce and academies flourished. Today, Islam is afflicted with poverty and illiteracy. There are approximately one billion Muslims in the world, a fifth of the world's population; 86 per cent of them have annual incomes of less than \$2000; 76 per cent less than \$1000; and 67 per cent less than \$500. The total income of Muslim states in 1988 was only about \$833 billion, or about \$900 per person. Muslim illiteracy worldwide stands at about 51 per cent for all age groups over fifteen. Despite a rapid increase in primary school enrolment, only 45 per cent of Muslim children aged six to eleven attend primary school. An even larger gap exists at higher levels of research. In the developed world, scientists and technologists employed in research and development number about 2600 per million inhabitants; the corresponding figure in the Muslim world is only 100 per million.

I could go on, but the picture is clear. Islam today remains dependent, and in many respects is still at some distance from posing

any serious challenge to the West, economically, militarily and intellectually. One could well argue the case that the challenge of East Asia is far greater. But the long historical rivalry has made the West extremely sensitive to all change within Islam. Two developments have contributed a great deal to the sense that Islam may soon be poised to launch its first challenge in centuries. The first is Muslim immigration to the West. The second is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

The presence in parts of the West of growing Muslim populations, especially in Western Europe, represents the challenge from within. Since decolonisation, labour migration has expanded the numbers into the millions, especially in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands. The process continues unabated, since population in Islamic lands is growing much faster than productive capacity. Many of the leaders of immigrant Muslim populations have justified their presence here by renouncing acculturation – this, at a time when the willingness to assimilate Muslims is limited anyway. The resulting tensions on both sides are familiar to all, from the Rushdie affair in Britain, to the “head-scarves” episode in France, to the World Trade Centre bombing in America and so on. And of course there is the threat to public order posed by the violent reaction to the growing Muslim presence – exemplified by the repeated attacks on Muslim foreigners in Germany.

The second development to awaken a sense of threat has been the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the lands of Islam. This is not what the West expected when it abandoned imperial control and granted independence. When these lands were decolonised, rule passed to Westernised classes who sought Western aid. Unsure of their own leverage, they aligned around the power blocs of the Cold War and adopted the political language of the Western ideologies of liberalism, nationalism and socialism. Even if the assimilation of these ideologies was partial at best, the West believed that Islam was moving forward on the same evolutionary track.

But the new mass movements of Islamic fundamentalism which have emerged since the mid-1970s demand a radical reversal of direction. They are frustrated by the inability of present leaderships to deliver on the promise of a quantum leap to power and prosperity. They propose to abandon all the political and social models of the West for what they present as authentic Islam. They have raised the slogan, “Islam is the solution”, by which they mean to repudiate all of the solutions proffered by the West – including democracy and capitalism. They propose instead the vague ideas of Islamic government and Islamic economics. And they would gradually begin to forge the now-divided Islam into a power bloc, in a bid to restore Islam’s long lost leverage against the West, and perhaps resurrect Islam as a global power.

So far, this brand of fundamentalism has seized power only in Islamic lands more distant from the West, in Iran and the Sudan – Iran in the heart of Asia, Sudan in the heart of Africa. But recently Islamic fundamentalism has made impressive gains on the Muslim shores of the Mediterranean – especially in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. This, despite the fact that these are the Muslim societies closest to the West geographically have gone the furthest down the road of Westernisation. Islamic fundamentalism has yet to acquire power in a Mediterranean country, but it has come close in Algeria, heightening the sense of strategic threat to the West. This now revolves around the concern that an Islamic state or bloc of states might acquire nuclear weapons, or impede the free flow of oil to the West, or do both.

This, then, is what is generally understood as the challenge of Islam to the West. There is the immediate concern that Islam is exporting its surplus population to the West; that it might import the West's most destructive technologies; and that this exchange might serve to undermine Western security. Some advocate stop-gap answers in the form of more stringent limits on immigration and technology transfers. But in both instances, the possibilities of seepage or leakage appear very high. If that happens, there is a longer-term concern that Islam, far from remaining satisfied by its present orbit around the West, is likely in some places to try to break away and form a separate and rival power centre. No one can know what unexpected forms the resulting conflict might take.

Professor Samuel Huntington has provided us with a very useful global framework for understanding the conflict between Islam and the West, in his much discussed article in *Foreign Affairs*. Of all the competing visions of the future of world politics, his is the only one which has made any serious effort to integrate Islam. Indeed, Islam is central to his thesis; the conflict between Islam and the West is presented as the *prime* civilisational conflict. He supports his argument for the salience of civilisational conflict largely by pointing to skirmishes already underway on the frontiers of Islam – in Bosnia to Islam's west, in Azerbaijan to its north, in the Sudan to its south, and in Kashmir to its east. "Islam has bloody borders", as he puts it. Professor Huntington sees these skirmishes on the frontiers of Islam as perhaps the best evidence of a new *pattern* of conflict.

It is important to note that this is practically the opposite of the approach of Francis Fukayama, for whom the resilience of Islam is a glitch; he regards these same conflicts as archaic, out of synchronisation with world time, waged in distant outposts which have yet to hear that history has reached resolution. Far from anticipating the future, they are the last survivals of a *past* pattern of conflict. Hegel, by the way, had the same view of Islam; it was an antithesis to the Roman thesis, essentially rendered irrelevant by the synthesis of modern Europe. Now

philosophies of history are subject to rapid turnover, and we are all groping in the dark. I would only say that this idea accords with an interpretation that is now resurgent and widespread within Islam itself.

Allow me to expand upon that last point. Much as we might dread the renewal of a clash of Western and Islamic civilisations, there are many in the Muslim fundamentalist world who believe the struggle never ended. From their point of view, the West never suspended its civilisational "Crusade" against Islam. It prosecuted a continuous "Crusade" *alongside* the great European wars and the Cold War. Westerners called this imperialism, and Western historians today usually interpret it as a side-effect of European and later Cold War rivalry. But many Muslims can never accept that such mundane rivalries drove imperialism, at least in Muslim lands; to them, the ethos of imperialism simply encapsulated the age-old dream of the Christian West to dominate and eradicate Islam. Nothing you can tell these Muslims will persuade them that imperialism had any other motive – political, strategic or economic. Every clash was a clash of civilisations: so it was, so it is and so it will be. Muslims, and especially fundamentalists, have taken the salience of civilisational conflict for granted all along.

These Muslims are eager to see the West acknowledge the salience of civilisational conflict, precisely because this is the only form of conflict which Islam recognises as legitimate. The Islamic law of war – the concept of jihad, which has seen such a revival over the past decade – regards the objective of conflict not as the acquisition of territory or markets or domination over others. The purpose of jihad is to defend or spread Islam. It is a civilising mission. Of course the historical practice of Islamic states has often been at variance with Islamic law, and wars have been waged for many different reasons, even among Islamic states. But the whole point of the present fundamentalist resurgence is to restore a pure ideal, and part of that pure ideal is pure conflict – conflict in which Islam meets its historical adversaries as one religion meets another, in a test of truth.

It is for this reason that nothing enrages the fundamentalists more than the idea of a "new world order," an order based on the primacy of the West. The thrust of this criticism is to argue that the "new world order" is yet one more disguise for the Christian West's campaign to keep Islam weak and disorganised. I want to give you a flavour of this discourse, by quoting some of these fundamentalists. Consider, for example, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Islamic movement. The "new world order", he says,

is even more oppressive and severe than the old world order, which tried to banish Islam and ruin it. For the first time, the United Nations has become a real international government with a president – none other than the president of the United States. It has a legal branch to endorse American decisions – the Security Council – and an executive branch, in the form of

the US military. It has a financial apparatus – the World Bank and other giant financial institutions – and it has a massive media machine. Government by the United Nations is really government by the United States, which is the main characteristic of the “new world order”. This “new world order,” from the point of view of its intellectual content, its ideology, and its religion, isn’t new. It is simply American hegemony over the world, clothed in the ideology of human rights.

In sum, while there is a reluctance in the West to formulate conflict in civilisational terms, there is an actual preference for doing so in many parts of Islam. In the minds of many Muslims, the West is still prosecuting a “Crusade” against them, to which the appropriate response is Islamic resistance, or jihad. There is no embarrassment at evoking the defence or spread of Islam – and considerable frustration at the West whenever it claims to be defending ostensibly universal values like democracy or human rights. They maintain that when the West marches on Islam under the banner of liberty, democracy or the “new world order”, it sows confusion among the Muslims. During the last Gulf war, one major line of Iraqi propaganda against the West argued that beneath the West’s cover of international legitimacy, it was pursuing a Crusade against Islam – an Islam led, appropriately, by the modern Saladin, Saddam Hussein.

If many Muslims prefer to understand their conflict with the West as civilisational – as a conflict with the heirs of Christendom – then this is no less true of their conflict with the Jews. In the heart of Islam, there is a foreign body, implanted by the West to assist in the domination of Islam. That foreign body is Israel. In the fundamentalist view, the conflict with Israel must not be viewed as a territorial dispute, somehow subject to resolution by a territorial compromise. Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghawsha, who is now in exile in Jordan, put it this way recently:

We think the conflict between the Arabs and Jews, between the Muslims and the Jews, is a cultural conflict that will continue to rage throughout all time... Algeria fought for 130 years. Even the Baltic states, which were occupied by the Soviets, have had their independence recognised by world states 45 years after they were occupied. The Palestine question is only [about] 40 years old, considering that it came into being in 1948. We are at the beginning of the road. Our adversary needs to be dealt with through a protracted and continuous confrontation.

In this view, the present Arab-Israeli peace process is anathema, precisely because it might succeed. Israel, it is feared, will be prepared to sacrifice the West Bank and Gaza, in order to become “normalised” in its Islamic surroundings. Israel would then use the provisions for “normalisation” in any peace accord in order to extend its cultural and economic domination over a vast expanse of the Islamic world. The only way to prevent the complete subordination of Islam to the Jews is to perpetuate the conflict with Israel, until such a time as the Muslims are strong enough to liberate Jerusalem and restore Palestine to Islam.

This is the argument of a wide range of contemporary Islamic movements, from Shiite movements aligned with Iran, to Sunni movements of the Muslim Brotherhood variety.

If I have gone to some length to demonstrate the prevalence of this civilisational view of conflict among Muslims themselves, there is a reason. There are some in the West who prefer to believe that Muslim fundamentalists, despite everything they have said, really are prepared to accept the world as it is, should they come to power. After all, the states which have sold oil will still sell it; states which have needed aid will still need it. Once in power, promises a Western apologist, fundamentalists will

generally operate on the basis of national interests and demonstrate a flexibility that reflects acceptance of the realities of a globally interdependent world.

If fundamentalists are prepared to accept these realities, they have certainly kept it a closely guarded secret, and one wonders on what evidence such assertions are based. Of course Islam will sell its oil. The issue is what will be done with the proceeds, and the answer being offered by Iran, and perhaps others, is to buy fire from the West – ultimately, one fears, nuclear fire. Proliferation will then create a “new world order” based not on American hegemony but on a new balance of power. As Hezbollah’s mentor, Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, says in a transparent reference to military might and the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons:

We may not have the actual power the US has, but we had the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that power in the future.

By “previously,” of course, Fadlallah is harking back to the time when Islam constituted one of the world’s greatest powers. His time frame for the acquisition of such power in the future is the next 40 years.

So far, I’ve addressed what might best be called perceptions and intentions. This is how many Muslims see the conflict, and this is how they believe it will be resolved. They hope that at some point in the future, in circumstances even they cannot foresee, one or more Islamic states will break into the circle of medium-sized powers. When that objective is achieved, it will be the first step toward the elimination of Western domination of Islam. Is this likely? Is Islam really in a position to pose this challenge? Or is it a figment of both their imaginations and ours?

To answer that question, we would want to consider individual Islamic states, to assess their stability and particularly the prospects for Islamisation. We would want to look at prospects for coordinated action. We would want to look at arms acquisitions and patterns of proliferation, to assess how and when the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, is likely to become a nuclear power. Perhaps we would want

to examine the issue of terrorism, to determine the potential threat to the West in its own capitals. I suspect that if we had the time to do all that, the answer would be that the challenge is still in a formative stage. Islam still remains dependent economically and vulnerable militarily. Islam is still fragmented into dozens of states; these states are still stronger than their societies and make separate calculations of their interests. Dreams of Islamic power are still far from being realised, and Muslims often lament the lack of any concerted Islamic plan of action to pool resources for a shared purpose.

Certainly before Islam will be poised to pose a serious challenge to the West, it will have to overcome the West that is within. I think that Professor Huntington is quite right in anticipating an intensification of the civilisational strife between Islam and the West. But the fact is this strife has been *internalised* in most societies of the Islamic world. Significant parts of these societies, including regimes and elites, have been partly Westernised. There are many Muslims who feel a close cultural affinity to the West, or at least a real ambivalence about the ability of Islam to provide a workable alternative. The force of these Muslims is considerable. They provided local support for the international effort against Saddam. They are now working with the US to build a new regional security order. And they have joined as partners in a peace process designed to "normalise" the status of Israel in the region. As we look over the "bloody borders" of Islam let's not forget that the Arab-Israeli conflict has been moving toward a resolution, however fitfully. Before Islam can mount a challenge to the West, the forces of Islamic authenticity will have to score many more local victories, both in the cultural war and in actual struggles for power. It seems to me we are not there yet.

What does this mean for the pattern of civilisational conflict proposed by Professor Huntington as the next stage in international relations? There undoubtedly will be more outbreaks of conflict along the fault lines that divide Muslim and non-Muslim. But the more intense conflict will pit Muslim against Muslim. This is a struggle that will be conducted not on the "bloody borders" of Islam, but in its increasingly bloody capitals – in places like Algiers and Cairo. This struggle has been underway for nearly two decades. It spawned a revolution in Iran, and played a role in the eight-year war between two Muslim countries, Iran and Iraq, that took an immense toll in life and treasure. The outcome of this struggle is still far from decided. The Shah of Iran is gone, but the King of Jordan is still with us. Women are returning to the veil in Egypt, but a woman has become prime minister of Turkey, and another has returned to the prime ministership in Pakistan. Islam is divided against itself culturally and it is not at all certain that Islamic civilisation can now achieve anything like the degree of integration the West has achieved. In fact, what we see in

Islam is an evolving Cold War, between two clearly identifiable blocs – social blocs within countries and strategic blocs among states. The dividing issue is whether or not secularisation is essential to modernisation. Turkey and Iran represent the two opposite poles; those other regions of the Islamic world which have not made a choice will find it difficult to avoid doing so much longer.

What should the West do in this environment? In this Islamic Cold War, the West will be asked to choose sides – just as the West asked Islam to choose sides in its Cold War. That choice must be clear. In the short term, the primary task is to work to assure that in this Muslim Cold War, moderate Islam is not overwhelmed. It must be assured of the West's support against that smaller bloc committed to overturning the status quo. It is also essential to discourage the gestation of a civilisational Islamic bloc, by urging Muslims into regional frameworks which are cross-civilisational. The idea of the Middle East, and of the Mediterranean, have this quality of being cross-civilisational. That portion of Islam that is rooted in the West, from Bosnia to Brooklyn, must also be offered the incentive of integration as equals, lest they become sources of disintegration. It is then reasonable to hope that the battle of cultures can be contained to Islamic lands themselves, as a struggle over identity between Muslims – and not fought out in the West, in the burning out of World Trade Centres and immigrant hostels.

In the longer term, I think it important to stress that there is nothing inevitable about the triumph of Islamic confrontationism. Of course Islam will always make for cultural differences, and such differences divide. There is a struggle ahead – in the capitals of Islam, on its frontiers and occasionally in the West. In a sense, of course, this is a continuation of a struggle that has gone on for nearly a millennium and a half. And yet in another sense, things can never be the same as they were before the "Great Western Transmutation". The clock cannot be turned back. The ideas of the West have worked their way into the very soul of Islam, generating gnawing self-doubt. And the spread of cultural relativism in the West has made for widespread deracination here, where the young are more likely to have read *The Diary of Malcolm X* than *Madame Bovary*. It seems unlikely to me that the line between Islam and the West will ever be as clearly defined as it was before Enlightenment and Empire smudged it. It is the challenge of the West, to assure that fundamentalists do not succeed in redrawing the line, in the hearts of Westerners and Muslims alike.