

Insecurity and Islam

George Perkovich

On many levels, the bombing of the World Trade Center hit home. It localized what had been a somewhat distant American fear and loathing of "Islam." Radical and violent Islamic militants are here. Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, with his blind white eyes televised daily into living rooms across America, is a made-to-order symbol of this new American nightmare. The fearsome specter of Islam grows.

Of course, the "Islamic Threat" loomed large in American consciousness even before the February bombing. For several years now—since the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War ended—pundits, defense industrialists, elected officials, and other opinion-makers have portrayed a rising green tide of Islamic fundamentalism which could threaten to turn Western cities red with terrorist-wrought blood, overthrow American-friendly governments in oil-rich Arab states, unleash weapons of mass destruction on Israel, and ultimately threaten the United States with nuclear attack. The proposition is summed up in the recent headline, "Rising Islam May Overwhelm the West."

Some observers have noted that the Islamic Threat may be replacing the Cold War Soviet Threat in the American mind. Indeed, the similarities between the Cold War and the emerging U.S. (and international) posture toward "Islam" and certain Islamic states deserve systematic analysis. However, it seems accurate to say that the perception of the Islamic Threat is inflated and distorted. It is a curious product of next-to-zero knowledge multiplied by a large integer of fear. This is not to dismiss the despicable

and counterproductive violence of extremists, nor to ignore the hostility of leaders and citizens in certain nations populated by Muslims. Rather, the point is simply that American society appears inclined to see and act toward "the world of Islam" in a dangerously unrealistic and uncomprehending way—to commit the time-held fallacy of "fighting the last war," in this case reprising the Cold War in circumstances where the model does not apply.

Unlike communism in the 1940s and 1950s, Islam appears to hold little potential to seduce and subvert American workers, children, filmmakers, State Department officials, or others on whom the American way of life depends. Islam as a worldview and Muslims as a group hold no power to undermine Western values or institutions. Islamic armies pose no match for American forces, as the Gulf War demonstrated. And Islam is not monolithic, as Iran's backing of Armenia in the conflict with Azerbaijan indicates as one example among many. The external military threats to Israeli security today are no greater, and perhaps are less significant, than those of the 1960s and 1970s, due to peace with Egypt, negotiations with a Syria which is cutting its military spending, and a weakened Iraq. In any case, concern for Israel does not explain the widespread American fear of the Islamic Threat.

Perhaps terrorism accounts for the movement of Islam into the place once held by communism in the American mind. Yet, the likelihood of being killed in America by an automatic-weapon-wielding American kook is much greater than the chance that an Islamic terrorist will cause your death. In reality, the national security establishment and its massive budgets and arsenals can offer lamentably little protection against the small and diffuse

terrorist threat. And if Islamic movements threaten to overturn unrepresentative but American-friendly governments in oil-rich territories, an American strategy motivated by Cold War-like hostility and military preparation will be ineffective. The most potent threat is political; it cannot be defeated by arms and will only be inflamed by a high-profile "us" versus "them" American posture. Again, this is not to ignore the real conflicts of interest between the U.S. and Islamicist forces in Iran, Egypt, or the Occupied Territories, but rather to put the threat in perspective.

American and international fixation on the Islamic Threat is profoundly ironic. For "Islam," and the silent majority of "practicing" Muslims, have a great deal to fear from the West. Islam as a way of life—a code of traditional values and practices, family relations, social and sexual mores, a habit of dress, a way of understanding humankind's place in nature—is under siege by Western influence. Radio and television waves lead the assault. Madonna symbolizes it. At least this is the view that Akbar Ahmed offers in his witty, trenchant, and judicious *Postmodernism and Islam* (Routledge, 1992). Ahmed, a renowned Pakistani-born Cambridge University scholar, explains that Islam has clung to its traditions unlike other cultures, in part because it rejected the epistemology, skepticism, and flexibility of the Greeks. As a result of these influences, Judeo-Christian cultures embraced scientific rationalism and the modernist belief that progress entails adaptations of religious belief and practice. The tensions of hanging onto Islamic culture against the countervailing pull of media-delivered Western culture has made traditional Muslims feel threatened. In Ahmed's view, contemporary Islamic revivalists are responding both to this tradition of scientific

George Perkovich is the director of the Secure Society Program of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia.

rationality and rapid change, and to its successor, postmodernism, with its rejection of the possibility of any unifying worldview. The "centre of their crisis today," Ahmed writes, "[is] how to preserve timeless moral precepts in a rapidly changing world." (p. 58)

We in the West have spent so much time since the 1979 Iranian revolution fearing Islamic fundamentalists that we have not stopped to consider what the world looks like from their mosques or universities. The problems are not merely cultural—Madonna versus Mohammed. "Most of the Muslim nations are ruled by authoritarian figures in or out of uniform, often employing an Islamic idiom to support their rule. Corruption is endemic, and law and order constantly threatens to collapse. The picture for Muslim education is also bleak," Ahmed writes. (p. 117) Expectations of common citizens have gone unmet, particularly in the case of the educated young urban population who now comprise the heart of Islamic protest movements in Egypt and turbulent Asian states, and who have been excluded from political participation and upward mobility.

Weak and besieged by the anti-values of the Western world, many Muslims seek protection and redefinition in their "ethnic or Islamic identity (not necessarily the same thing and at times opposed to each other) as against an imported foreign or Western one," according to Ahmed. "The catalyst may well have been provided by the political and military disasters after the first flush of independence from the colonial powers." (p. 32)

Indeed, post-independence failures lie at the core of Muslim insecurity, foremost among them the inability to significantly improve standards of living. Technological and technocratic development have lagged badly. Many factors explain this underdevelopment. But one profound cause is often underestimated, perhaps because analysts and commentators tend not to explore the philosophy and history of science and technology. That is, neither science nor technologies and the capacity to produce and manage them are created in cultural vacuums. As Jacques Ellul, Langdon Winner, Michel Foucault, and others have demonstrated, societies that achieve high levels of material development through science and technology end up being organized at least in part by technology's dictates. Technology speeds the pace of work

and life; it enshrines the values of innovation, constant change, and merciless efficiency. Education becomes secularized under the influence of science—and churches are separated from states, whose mission becomes in large part the perpetuation of society's technical apparatus. Even moderately technological societies witness a sundering of family webs, as labor becomes specialized and migrates to where the technology is, often away from the home or village or neighborhood. In short, highly technological societies experience a weakening of religion and traditional culture as the dominant guides and sources of meaning in the daily lives of individuals and the larger society. Science and technology are profoundly secularizing forces—except where they become their own "religion," which is precisely what traditionalists fear.

Can Islamic societies develop technologically and still maintain their traditions—achieve indigenous mastery over science and technology, not just import it but create it? Can a society reject scientific rationalism—repositing authority in open-ended inquiry into the causes and effects of human and non-human phenomena—and still achieve a high level of education, industrialization, medical care, and transportation? If the answer is negative, what are the prospects for economic development in Islamic societies that choose to reject the culture of science and technology which has been identified with the West?

Although *Postmodernism and Islam* touches frequently on the tension between Islam and science and technology, Ahmed never says whether this tension is inherent in Islam. He does not locate current Islamic scientific and technical weaknesses in history or politics as, for example, the Pakistani physicist, Pervez Hoodbhoy does in his laudable book, *Islam and Science*. Hoodbhoy observes:

About 700 years ago, Islamic civilization almost completely lost the will and ability to do science. . . . Many Muslims acknowledge and express profound regret at this fact. Indeed, this is the major preoccupation of the modernist faction in Islam.

Hoodbhoy's more political analysis suggests that while many features of Islam run counter to science, this is not

inevitable. Leaders choose whether to invest in education and science, and it is in their power to let their most skilled scientific and technical minds operate freely. It is not necessarily irrational or backward to reject the speed, loneliness, and sterility of technological society; but if national leaders want to have the spoils of science and technology while maintaining the deep traditions of Islam, they will have to demonstrate much greater understanding of the forces with which they are dealing.

The outcome should matter greatly to "us"; our future as well as theirs is implicated. Underdevelopment is in fact among the causes of Islamic militancy and hostility to the West. Militant Islamicists in turn may undermine the security of countries ranging across the Fertile Crescent of Asia. If traditional Islam cannot assimilate the ways of technology, Islamicist-led societies and the international community may be sucked into a downward spiral of hostility toward the West. Seeing the risk, Ahmed concludes that "the logic of the argument demands that the West uses its power—which includes the media—to assist in solving the long-festered problems that plague Muslim society." The power the West wields best is science and technology, including technocratic management of government. It remains unclear whether the Islamic tradition—and more to the current political point, the voices of Islamic traditionalism—will allow or make adequate use of this inherently secular assistance.

Ahmed does not attempt to predict the future. His purpose is more general and palliative: to urge tolerance in the Islamic world toward the West and to open Western minds to the virtues of Islam. On the latter point, Ahmed writes that Islam "can provide a corrective and a check to the materialism that characterizes much of contemporary civilization, offering instead compassion, piety and a sense of humility [and] security and stability in family life, in marriage and in care for the aged." (pp. 117-18) The notion that Islam could offer something of value may seem inconceivable to many in the West, especially given the usurpation of Islam's image by the small number of terrorists and extremists carrying the banner of fundamentalism. But contemplating this possibility turns out to be an interesting exercise in self- and national examination. □