

The Return of the Neo-Kharjites

Ziauddin Sardar
The Journal Futures
UK

A great deal has been written about the "clash of civilisations". But to have a clash we need at least two civilizations. If it is supposed to be a clash of western and Islamic civilisations then civilisation as a coherent entity with a worldview embedded in humane values are conspicuous by their absence on both sides. The Muslim civilisation as a coherent entity has not existed for at least a few centuries. What we have nowadays is a collection of 56 warring and fragmented Muslim states. As far as "western civilisation" is concerned, I tend to agree with Ghandi that "it is a good idea". If the idea was a distant ideal in Ghandi's time, it is perhaps even further from realisation today. A culture that has double standards on human rights, that redefines international laws to suite its own expediency, that tortures people through "extra rendition" (that is, sending them to a third country), that imposes its will on the point of gun, that deliberately allows the bombing of innocent civilians to obtain political advantage, that believes its values and lifestyles are innately superior to values of all other cultures – such a culture cannot be said to be civilised by any definition. What we have instead is a clash of two ideologies that are a mirror image of each other: the neo-conservatives in "the West", if such a distinct place still exists in a globalised world, and their counterpart in the Muslim world who I describe as the neo-Kharjites.

The ideology of the neocons is well known. Its two essential components are the belief in the unquestioning superiority of American culture and values and its "full spectrum dominance" on the globe. As the neocon manifesto, "Rebuilding America's Defences: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century"¹, put it way back in the early 1990, "at present the United States faces no global rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible". This will require America to modernise its military, take weapons into space, increase defence spending and control the "international commons" of cyberspace. The four "core missions" for the American military require it to defend the American homeland; fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars; perform the "constabulary" duties associated with shaping the security environment in critical regions and transform U.S. forces to exploit the "revolution in military affairs." The neocon ideology is essentially a declaration of Pax Americana: all neocons, American, British, European or those from the non-West, believe in this mission, consciously or unconsciously.

In *American Dream, Global Nightmare*, I and my co-author Merryl Wyn Davies, the neocon ideology of Pax Americana as ten laws. Here, they are reproduced without elaboration:

Law 1: Fear is essential.

Law 2: Escape is the reason for being.

Journal of Futures Studies, November 2006, 11(2): 119 - 124

Law 3: Ignorance is bliss.

Law 4: America is the idea of nation.

Law 5: Democratisation of everything is the essence of America.

Law 6: American democracy has the right to be imperial and express itself through Empire.

Law 7: Cinema is the engine of Empire.

Law 8: Celebrity is the common currency of Empire.

Law 9: War is a necessity.

Law 10: American tradition and history are universal narratives applicable across all time and space.

The neocon ideology operates within these laws, which are assumed to be self-evident truths, to shape the future totally in the image of America. But the neocon ideology does not have very deep roots; it can be traced back only as far as the days of the founding fathers of America. In contrast, its mirror image, the neo-Kharjites philosophy has a much longer history going right back to the formative phase of Islam in the seventh century. While the neocons dress themselves in sophisticated grab, embedding their rhetoric in neo-liberal free market economy, the politics of democracy and the dynamics of globalised culture, the neo-Kharjites use a much more archaic and banal language. But the overall goals of both ideologies are the same: global domination.

The neo-Kharjites are best represented by al-Qaida and other extremist and terrorists organisations that we find in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. The Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan for a short period and who are now making a come back, also express the neo-Kharjite philosophy. But where do the neo-Kharjites come from? They emerged within a few decades after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Prophet Muhammad was succeeded by four Caliphs who are known as the "Rightly Guided" because of their close friendship and relationship with the Prophet. Muslims regard the period of their rule in idealised terms – as the best human endeavour can achieve. But this was also a period of dissent, wars and rebellions. Three of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs were murdered. One particular set of rebels, who were responsible for the murder of Ali, the fourth Caliph, were known as the Kharjites. The Kharjites were a puritan sect who believed that history had come to an end after the revelation to the Last Prophet. From now on, there could not be any debate or compromise on any question: the "decision is God's alone". They were prone to extremist proclamations, denouncing Ali as well as Othman, the third Caliph, and pronounced everyone who did not agree with their point of view as infidel and outside the law.

The Kharjites developed a radically different interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim. To be a Muslim, they argued, is to be in a perfect state of soul. Someone in that state cannot commit a sin and engage in wrong doing. Sin, therefore was a contradiction for a true Muslim – it nullified the believer and demonstrated that inwardly he was an apostate who had turned against Islam. Thus anyone who did any wrong was not really a Muslim. He could thus be put to death. Indeed, the Kharjites believed that all non-Kharjite Muslims were really apostates who were legitimate target for violence.

Although the Kharjites were eventually suppressed, their thought has reoccurred in Islamic history with cyclic regularity. They led several rebellions during the Abbasid period (749-1258) which is conventionally seen as the Golden Age of Islam. The influence of their thought can clearly be seen on ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), the great grandfather of Wahhabism, and one of the most influential political scientists of Islamic history. Kharjite thought is also evident in the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abdel Wahhab (1703-1787), the founder of the Wahhabi sect. It shaped the outlook of Syed Qutb (1906-1966), the chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, we can see their clear influence not just on those who subscribe to the bin Ladin doctrine, such groups as Hizb-e-Tahrir and al-Muhajaron, but also on certain mainstream organisations.

This tradition that nourishes the neo-Kharjite mentality has three inherent characteristics. First, it is ahistoric. It abhors history; and drains it of all humanity and human content. Islam as a religion, interpreted in the lives and thought of people called Muslims, is not something that unfolded in history with all its human strengths and weaknesses, but a utopia that exists outside time. Hence it has no notion of progress, moral development or human evolution.

We can see how this ahistoric tendency works in Saudi Arabia. Mecca and Medina are the holiest cities of Islam. Their sacred environment had remained unchanged for centuries, right up to the middle of the twentieth century. However, during the last fifty years, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina have suffered incalculable violence. Over 300 historical sites have been systematically levelled. Only a few historic buildings remain in Mecca – these are about to be demolished. Layers upon layers of the sacred history of Mecca have been bulldozed to make roads and parking lots! Wahhabism, the dominant tradition of Saudi Arabia, does not believe in history or allows the preservation of old building, especially those related to the Prophet. Why? Because other Muslims will relate to the history of the Prophet, they will see him as a man living in a particular time and space that placed particular demands on him and forced him to act in particular ways. The Wahhabis want to universalise and eternalise every act of the Prophet. For them the context is not only irrelevant but dangerous. It has to be expunged. What this means is that the time of the Prophet has to be constantly recreated both in thought and action. It is perfect time: frozen and eternalised. Since it is perfect, it cannot be improved: it is the epitome of morality, incapable of growth.

Second, this ideal tradition is monolithic. It does not recognise, understand or appreciate a contrary view. Those who express an alternative opinion are seen as apostates, collaborators or worse. It also means that there is only one Islam: other interpretations that differ from the neo-Kharjite variety are outlawed. The plurality and diversity of Islam, that has existed for the last 1500 years, is expunged. Other Muslims are declared heretics or unbelievers.

A recent cause calibre of Islamic law in India demonstrates what I mean. Imrana Bibi, 28-year old wife of a poor rickshawpuller in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, was raped by her father-in-law. The religious scholars of Deoband, an influential seminary with Wahhabi tendencies, issued a fatwa: her marriage is nullified, her husband is forbidden to her forever, she will have to separate for life from him and her five children.

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board endorsed the "punishment". When Imrana Bibi herself along with women's rights group complained about the double injustice, the clerics at Deoband declared: "She had a physical relationship with her father-in-law. It does not matter whether it was consensual or forced. She cannot live with her husband. Any Muslim who opposes our fatwa is not a true Muslim and is betraying Islam".

So no complaint or opposition is allowed. A perfect tradition can only produce perfect fatwas. And those who are seen as betraying Islam can themselves become subjects of other perfect fatwas. As a tradition outside history, the neo-Kharjite ideology cannot tolerate the diversity of Islam. The humanist or rationalist tradition of Islam, or the great mystical tradition, are thus seen as dangerous deviations. In Bangladesh, the Wahhabis and Deobandis are terrorising and burning the mosques of the Ahmadiyyah sect, which does not see the Prophet Muhammad as the last Prophet, and insist that they should be declared "non-Muslims". In Pakistan, the Sunnis are killing Shias because they do not see them as legitimate Muslims. Ditto in Iraq. In Algeria, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) openly declared that the entire "Algerian nation" was deviant and should be killed. In Saudi Arabia, you cannot even take a commentary or translation of the Qur'an into the country that does not follow the prescribed line.

Notice also that this tradition has a very specific view of sin. A perfect tradition must lead to perfect Muslims, who do not and cannot commit sin. Those who commit sin, that is disagree or deviate, cannot be Muslims. Those outside this tradition are sinners and have to be brought to the Straight Path. The victims of sin themselves become sinners who have to be punished.

Third, this tradition is aggressively self-righteous; and insists on imposing, just like the neocons insist on imposing their notion of free market democracy, its notion of righteousness on others. It legitimises intolerance and violence by endlessly quoting the famous verse from the Qur'an which ask the believers "to do good and prevent evil deeds". The Bali bombers justified their actions with this verse. The Indonesian Front for the Defenders of Islam frequently burns and destroys cafes, cinemas and discos – places they consider to be sites of immoral or immodest behaviour. The hated religious police in Saudi Arabia are on the streets every day imposing a "moral code" (mainly on women). In Pakistan, the religious scholars succeeded in banning mixed – male and female – marathons.

Like the neocons themselves, the neo-Kharjites have no doubt their values are best in this best of all possible worlds. The neocon see their identity in terms of the best nation in the world, a true beacon for the rest of humanity; so the neo-Kharjites see their identity as shaped by the best religion with the finest arrangements and precepts for all aspects of human existence; and there can be no deviation from the path. Those who do not agree are at best lesser Muslims and at worse legitimate targets for violence. For the neocons, those who disagree are the enemies of America and its brand of democracy and thus lesser mortals. In neo-Kharjite rhetoric, all is sacred, nothing secular and retribution the paramount duty. In neo-con rhetoric all is America and must succumb to America or suffer the consequences. Both have left humanity and history out of the equation and feel no guilt or remorse. Since the idea that they are perfect is part of their psychological makeup, the neo-Kharjites can bomb, kill and

maim with impunity. The neo-cons can bomb innocent populations and find disingenuous ways to justify torture without batting an eyelid.²

"When two elephants fight", goes an old Malay proverb, "it's the grass in between that gets trampled". The vast majority of humanity, all those who do not subscribe to either neocon or neo-Kharjite philosophy, are being trampled. The vast majority of Muslims abhor violence and terrorism and know well that the Qur'an and various schools of Islamic law forbid killing of innocent civilians, suicide bombings and all kind of aggression. The majority of Americans abhor what the neocons are doing in their name. Yet, while the struggle between the two obscurantist elephants continues, most of us feel helpless.

But we cannot hand over the future to extremist ideologies. I think it is a duty of Muslims to recognise the Islamic nature of the problem that the terrorists have thrown up. They were acting in the name of Islam; it thus becomes the responsibility of all Muslims to critically examine the tradition that sustains them. The question of violence per se is not unique to Islam. All those who define themselves as the totality of a religion or an ideology have an innate tolerance for and tendency towards violence. It is the case in all religions and all ideologies down through all the ages. But this does not lessen the responsibility on Muslims throughout the world to be judicious, to examine themselves, their history and all it contains to redeem Islam from the pathology of this tradition. The neo-Kharjites place a unique burden on Muslims. To deny the fact that they are a product of Islamic history and tradition is more than complacency. It is a denial of responsibility; a denial of what is really happening in our communities. It's a refusal to live in the real world.

The neocons too place a special burden on all those who value plurality, humane values and believe that there is more than one way to be human. Here, we need to begin by realising that the war on terror, in fact, cannot be a war at all. It has to be a reasoned engagement with the politics of tradition. It is not a war at all but cultural politics. We need to fight to create spaces for other cultures to exist and thrive as other cultures; for difference to exist as difference. That is probably a very tall order. But unless we allow Other ways of knowing, being and doing we will hand the future to burgers and Coke. What a diminished world that would be.

Correspondence

Ziauddin Sardar
1 Orchard Gate, London NW9 6HU, UK
Email: ziauddin.sardar@btopenworld.com

Notes

1. Available from www.newamericancentury.org
2. On neocon ideology see Michael Ignatieff. 2003. *Empire Lite*. London: Vintage; and Paul Berman. 2003. *Terror and Liberalism*. New York: W W Norton. ; on neo-Kharjite philosophy see Bruce Lawrence and James Howarth. 2005. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*. Verso.



References

- Sardar, Ziauddin and Meryyl Wyn Davies. 2004. "Introduction." *American Dream, Global Nightmare*. Cambridge: Icon.
- _____. 2004. *Desperately Seeking Paradise*. London: Granta.

