

# Between imperialism and Islamism

Between the xenophobes of the West and the illogical fundamentalism in Muslim societies, the choices keep getting grimmer. A mutually beneficial disentanglement can only be provided by humane, reasoned and principled leftwing politics.

BY PERVEZ HOODBHOY



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Many of us in the left, particularly in Southasia, have chosen to understand the rise of violent Islamic fundamentalism as a response to poverty, unemployment, poor access to justice, lack of educational opportunities, corruption, loss of faith in the political system, or the sufferings of peasants and workers. As partial truths, these are indisputable. Those condemned to living a life with little hope and happiness are indeed vulnerable to calls from religious demagogues who offer a happy hereafter in exchange for unquestioning obedience.

American imperialism is also held responsible. This, too, is a partial truth. Stung by the attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States lashed out against Muslims almost everywhere. America's neoconservatives thought that cracking the whip would surely bring the world to order. Instead, the opposite happened. Islamists won massively in Iraq after a war waged on fraudulent grounds by a superpower filled with hubris, arrogance and ignorance. 'Shock and Awe' is now turning into 'Cut and Run'. The US is leaving behind a snake pit, from which battle-hardened terrorists are stealthily making their way to countries around the world. Polls show that the US has become one of the most unpopular countries in the world, and that, in many places, George W Bush is more disliked than Osama bin Laden. Most Muslims see an oil-greedy America, in collusion with Israel, as a crusader force occupying a historic centre of Islamic civilisation. Al-Qaeda rejoices. Its mission was to convince Muslims that the war was between Islam and unbelief. Today it brags: *We told you so!*

But like poverty and deprivation, imperialism and colonialism alone did not create violent Islamism.

Consciousness is not simply a consequence of material conditions; less tangible, psychologically rooted factors can be very important, as well. It is a palpable truth that the most dangerous religious radicalism comes from a deliberate and systematic conditioning of minds that is frenetically propagated by ideologues in mosques, madrassas and over the Internet. They have created a climate wherein external causes are automatically held responsible for any and all ills afflicting Muslim society. Shaky Muslim governments, as well as community leaders in places where Muslims are in a minority, have also successfully learned to generate an anger that steers attention away from local issues towards distant enemies, both real and imagined.

Islamic radicalism is bad news for Muslims. It pits Muslims against Muslims, as well as against the world at large. At the same time, it is only peripherally directed against the excesses of corrupt ruling establishments, or inspired by issues of justice and equity. The primary targets of Islamist violence today are other Muslims living in Muslim countries. Some fanatics terrorise and kill other Muslims who belong to the wrong sect. Others accuse "modernised Muslims" as of being vectors of hellish sinfulness – what is known as *jahiliya* – deserving the full wrath of God. The greatest ire among the orthodox is aroused by the simplest of things, such as women being allowed to walk around bare-faced, or the very notion that they could be considered the equal of men.

Contrary to its claims, Islamic radicalism is indifferent to the suffering of Muslims. We have not seen a large-scale street demonstration in any Muslim country protesting the ongoing genocide of Muslims in Darfur. The slaughter of Bosnian and Chechnyan Muslims

caused only a hiccup in the Muslim world. And, for all the rhetoric against the West, the American aggression on Iraq did not result in mass demonstrations by Islamic parties in any Muslim country.

On the other hand, fundamentalist fury explodes when the Faith is seen to be maligned. For example, mobs set afire embassies and buildings around the world for an act of blasphemy committed in Denmark; others violently protested the knighthood of Salman Rushdie. Even as Muslim populations become more orthodox, there is a curious, almost fatalistic, disconnection with the real world. This suggests that fellow Muslims do not matter any more – only the Faith does.

Islamic radicalism now knows no borders. In searching for solutions to an exploding problem, we must realise that the speed of communication makes it meaningless to regard problems in different parts of the Muslim world as solvable in isolation. Rising Islamism in one country cannot be wholly attributed to the government policies of that country (although that government may well bear considerable responsibility). Nevertheless, let us take a quick look at the Southasian region, before turning back to the global problem. Islamic radicalism has achieved an overwhelming presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is also rapidly changing the texture of society in Bangladesh, and is worsening relations between the minority Muslim population in India and the Hindu majority.

## Blowback in Pakistan

Pakistan is in the grip of a full-scale Islamist insurgency. Unable to combat the toxic mix of religion with tribalism, the Islamabad government has lost administrative authority in most areas bordering Afghanistan. The Taliban have asserted full administrative control in many tribal areas, forcing local government functionaries to flee. Taliban representatives are now the law. A widely available Taliban-made video shows the bodies of common criminals and bandits dangling from electricity poles in the town of Miranshah, the administrative headquarters of North Waziristan, while thousands of appreciative spectators look on. Girls' schools have been closed, and barbers have been handed six-foot-long death shrouds – *shave and die*. Polio vaccinations have been declared *haram* by the ulema, and the government campaign has subsequently stalled. Taliban vigilante groups enforcing the *sharia* patrol the streets of tribal towns, checking, among other things, the length of beards, whether the shalwars are worn at an appropriate height above the ankles, and the attendance of individuals in the mosques.

A new breed of young militants, trained in the madrassas, now calls the shots in many places in Pakistan. They have displaced the leadership of the traditional village elders, the *maliks*. In August 2007, a “peace jirga” of tribal leaders from Pakistan and Afghanistan was held in Kabul, attended by Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf. It was a failure. Many

influential *maliks* were afraid to come to the gathering, in spite of being offered protection by both governments (see *Himal September 2007*, “No jirga like a peace jirga”).

Sectarian clashes in Pakistani tribal areas are rife, fuelled by fiery mullahs operating private FM radio stations, broadcasting incendiary programmes targeting rival mullahs and the ‘immorality’ of modern culture. In April 2007, mortars and rockets were freely used by both Sunnis and Shias in Parachinar and Dera Ismail Khan in NWFP. In villages of Hangu District, in the tribal areas, both sides have exchanged light artillery and rocket fire, oftentimes leaving scores dead. In May 2007, fierce armed battles broke out between the Ansar-ul-Islam and Lashkar-e-Islam groups in Bara in the NWFP, while Tank and Mingora saw bloody clashes with the Frontier Constabulary.

The Talibanisation of Pakistan’s tribal areas has caused alarm, but the six-month-long standoff with the local Taliban of Islamabad’s central mosque, the Lal Masjid, was stunningly novel. Islamic vigilante squads roamed the city burning CD stores, kidnapping alleged prostitutes, and enforcing their own version of morality. This would have continued for even longer but for an incident in July that drew the ire of the Chinese government, after Chinese citizens were kidnapped from a Chinese-run brothel in Islamabad. The Pakistan Army finally launched a bloody assault that left at least 117 dead and hundreds more injured. This episode showed that various militant organisations, including Jaish-e-Muhammad (which had pioneered suicide bombings in Kashmir) could easily establish themselves in the city, with the super-vigilant Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and other military organisations choosing to look the other way.

Under US pressure, the Pakistan Army has mounted military offensives against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in recent months, but the resistance has stiffened. Pakistani soldiers are now refusing to fight. On 1 September, an entire military convoy surrendered to militants in Waziristan without firing a single shot. Three hundred Pakistani soldiers were taken hostage. But what shook the establishment was the subsequent suicide attack in Rawalpindi, on a bus carrying ISI employees on their way to work. More than 25 were killed. Since the bus was unmarked, this was clearly an inside job, suggesting that tribal militants and the Taliban have infiltrated deep into the military establishment. Not surprisingly, there has been a concurrent rise in fears in the West. According to the August 2007 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine, 35 percent of US foreign-policy experts believe that Pakistan is most likely to become the next al-Qaeda stronghold; 22 percent say that Pakistan is an ally that least serves America’s national-security interests.

## The rest of the neighbourhood

Afghanistan is in a still more desperate state than its neighbour, with Hamid Karzai's government controlling little more than Kabul. Poppy cultivation is up; girls' education is down. As in the Pakistani frontier, the Taliban have risen from the ashes after being routed by the American action following 9/11. They could have – and should have – been defeated by a correct mixture of military force, political strategising and speedy economic reconstruction of devastated areas. Instead, Washington, DC's myopic emphasis on military solutions has led to the Taliban's revival and subsequent spill-over into Pakistan's tribal areas. While Afghans do not want a return to the brutality of the Taliban regime, the wholesale corruption and participation of war criminals in the Karzai government has robbed it of credibility.

Bangladesh, which owes its birth to linguistic rather than religious nationalism, is nowhere close to Pakistan or Afghanistan in terms of militant influence. Nevertheless, there is a rapid transformation in progress. Many militant incidents, including bomb blasts, have occurred over the course of the past year. Reflecting broader changes within Bangladeshi society, mainstream politics has also transformed. In 1971, few would have thought that the Jamaat-i-Islami, which had openly sided with the West Pakistani army, could ever re-establish itself in Bangladeshi politics. But the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the last ruling party, had a number of senior leaders with close ideological affinity to the Jamaat. In villages, activists are imposing veils on women and forcing men to grow beards; secular intellectuals and leftwing activists have been murdered; Ahmadis are being persecuted; and what remains of the Hindu minority is being made increasingly uncomfortable.

India, whose democratic traditions have long provided a safety valve, had seen far less Muslim militancy than Pakistan, except in Jammu & Kashmir. But in 1992, a mob of Hindu zealots tore down the Babri Masjid, challenging India's claim to being a secularist and pluralist democracy. This set into motion a cycle of reaction and counter-reaction that has yet to play itself out. A state-assisted slaughter in 2002, which left almost 2000 Muslims dead in Gujarat, has been the most tragic consequence so far.

Unlike in Pakistan or Afghanistan, Muslims in India are primarily the victims, and not the perpetrators, of violence. Most are poor and uneducated, while the community itself lost

most of its capable individuals as migrants to Pakistan during Partition. While Muslim conservatism in India has increased visibly over the past decade, a growing Muslim middle class, and alternatives to the mosque as a venue for socialising, have made India relatively peaceful. However, as the July 2006 Bombay train bombings and this August's explosions in Hyderabad illustrated, extremist violence is on the rise, with the techniques used by the extremists similar to those used by al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants.

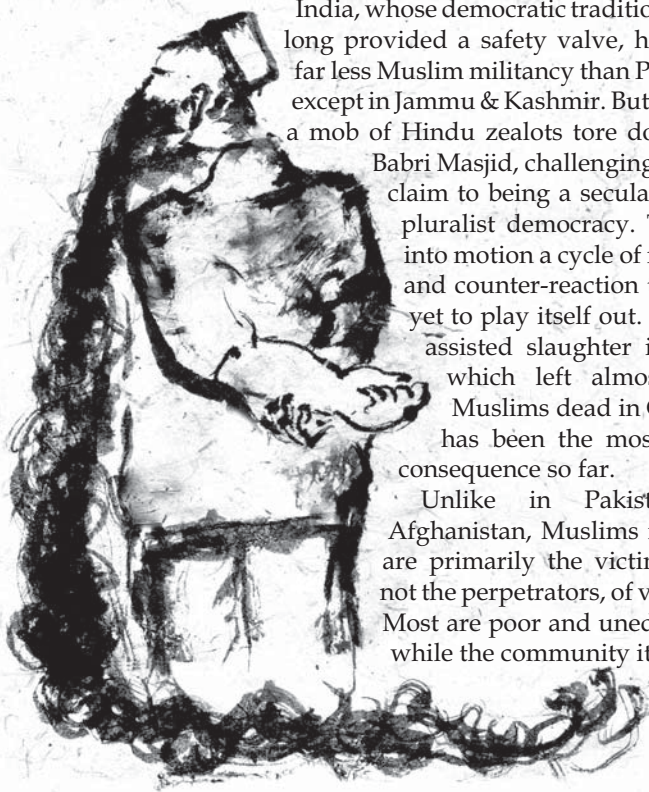
## What America must do

Southasia is not alone in facing violent Islamic militancy, of course. Faced with internal failure, manifest decline from a peak of greatness many centuries ago, and afflicted by cultural dislocation in the age of globalisation, many Muslim societies have turned inwards. From the early 1950s, following the era of decolonisation, a sense of grievance and frustration had produced a multitude of Islamist movements spreading from Algeria to Indonesia. But they were inconsequential. Had the US not cultivated them as allies against communism during the Cold War, history could have been very different.

Looking back to the middle of the 20th century, one cannot see a single Muslim nationalist leader who was a fundamentalist. Turkey's Kemal Ataturk, Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, Indonesia's Sukarno, Pakistan's Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iran's Mohammed Mosaddeq – all sought to organise their societies on the basis of secular values. However, Muslim and Arab nationalism, part of a larger anti-colonial nationalist current across the Third World, included the desire to control and use national resources for domestic benefit. The conflict with Western greed was inevitable. The imperial interests of Britain, and later that of the United States, feared independent nationalism. Anyone willing to collaborate was preferred, even the ultraconservative Islamic regime of Saudi Arabia. In time, as the Cold War pressed in, nationalism became intolerable. In 1953, Mosaddeq of Iran was overthrown in a CIA coup, replaced by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Britain targeted Nasser. Sukarno was replaced by Suharto after a bloody coup that left more than half a million dead.

Things came to a head with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The American strategy for defeating the 'Evil Empire' required marshalling the forces of Islam from every part of the world. With General Zia ul-Haq as America's foremost ally, and Saudi Arabia as the principal source of funds, the CIA openly recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen. It worked. In 1988, Soviet troops withdrew unconditionally, and the US-Pakistan-Saudi-Egypt alliance emerged victorious. A chapter of history seemed complete. But appearances

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were illusory, and events over the next two decades were to reveal the true costs of this victory. Even in the mid 1990s – long before the 9/11 attack on the US – it was clear that the victorious alliance had unwittingly created a genie suddenly beyond its control.

All this is history – and unchangeable. Today, relations between Islam and the West, particularly as represented by the US, are worse than ever before. A civilisational clash may not be here yet, but it could be around the corner. How can it be avoided? Imagine for a moment that the US had a sudden change of heart, realised the error of its ways, and wanted to bury the hatchet with Muslims. How could the US atone for its past? Here are ten key elements.

First, as demanded by both Muslims and non-Muslims across the globe, the US needs an attitudinal change. It must repudiate grand imperial designs as well as its claim to being an exception among nations. The notion of total planetary control had guided the Republican administration even before the attacks of 11 September 2001. The Democrats, meanwhile, many of whom have now publicly turned against the Iraq war, limit their criticisms to the strategy and conduct of the war, the lies and disinformation dispensed by the White House, suspicious deals with defence contractors, and the like. But they share with Republicans the belief that the US possesses the right – and adequate might – to mould the world according to its wishes. The people of the US must somehow convince themselves of the need to obey international laws and etiquettes, and that they do not have some divine mission to fulfil. In the post-Tony Blair period, Britain must also seek a foreign policy independent of the United States, and cultivate independent relations with Muslim countries.

Second, the creation of a Palestinian state must not be further postponed. The dispossession of Palestinians has been appropriated as a Muslim cause with huge symbolic significance. Peace between Islam and the West is impossible without some reasonable resolution of this problem. The US has given Israel carte blanche for military action against the Palestinians, as in the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and 2006. American officials remain silent about the future of occupied territories. The fact that Hamas and Fatah are at each other's throats does not mean that the Palestinian problem has gone away. On the contrary, it strengthens extremism and makes everything more difficult. Without a Palestinian state, the Palestinian problem will mutate into a new and still less controllable form.

Third, the US must take seriously the impact of collateral damage on civilian populations. The heavy use of airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan inevitably led

to large numbers of non-combatant casualties. Often the 'coalition forces' refuse to acknowledge civilian deaths; when confronted with incontrovertible evidence, they apologise and issue miserably small compensation. Karl Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, recently admitted that "military actions [in Afghanistan] ... by US and NATO forces will speak louder than those sincerely expressed words. As the death toll of civilians mounts, Afghan hearts and minds are being lost and, with that, the spectre of losing the war looms." Very sensibly, the goal of "zero innocent civilian casualties" was recommended a year ago by retired General Barry McCaffrey after a trip to Afghanistan.

Fourth, the US must stop threatening Iran with a nuclear holocaust for trying to develop nuclear weapons, while rewarding, to various degrees, other countries – Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea – that have developed such weapons surreptitiously. The *Sunday Times* in London reports: "The Pentagon has drawn up plans for massive airstrikes against 1200 targets in Iran, designed to annihilate the Iranians' military capability in three days." It would, of course, be highly preferable if Iran could be dissuaded by peaceful means, including sanctions, from making a bomb. But there is no strong moral argument available to the US against Iran's nuclear ambitions, given both its own nuclear stance and the fact that Iran's initial nuclear capability was provided by the US during the Shah's rule. The US refuses to work through the United Nations, or to support a nuclear-weapons free zone in West Asia. So far, the US has refused even to hold direct talks with the Iranian leadership to defuse the nuclear crisis. Overtures by Iran, such as were made by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his letter to President Bush in 2006, were rejected. But North Korea's nuclear test showed that US refusals to hold one-on-one talks have failed miserably. On the other hand, nuclear negotiations in exchange for oil have partially succeeded in halting North Korean nuclear developments.

Fifth, the US must not exploit the Sunni-Shia schism in the hope of weakening both. Clever as this might seem, using religious passions to achieve political ends is dangerous. Moreover, created monsters have a habit of turning against their masters – some notable examples include the CIA's Afghan jihad, Israel's experiment with Hamas, Pakistan's with jihadist groups, and India's with Sikh extremists. For US strategists, exploiting sectarianism is a hard temptation to resist: al-Qaeda and parts of the Sunni community in Iraq and Lebanon see Iran and Hizbollah as an even greater

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threat than the US occupation. They would welcome a US attack on Iran, perhaps even with nuclear weapons, and might even provoke a confrontation to encourage the US to do so.

Sixth, the US must not support dictators and quislings like General Musharraf and Hosni Mubarak while preaching the virtues of democracy. This breeds anger and resentment, and is especially dangerous given that US hypocrisy is so transparent.

Seventh, the West must seize opportunities that project it as generous, rather than aggressive. Providing disaster relief (including following the 2004 Tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir Earthquake) did much to build a positive image. Soft power is critical. Draining the swamps where extremism breeds will require increasing foreign aid to poor Muslim countries, creating economic and employment opportunities there, and desisting from policies that reward only the elites of the recipient societies.

Eighth, the US must accept the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have become worldwide symbols of arbitrary torture and imprisonment. They demonstrate that, in dealing with suspected 'terrorists', the US has suspended subservience to the rule of law. In doing so, it does only marginally better than the real militants it seeks to combat. Nor should the US outsource the use of torture to repressive regimes like Pakistan, Syria and Egypt. This too can only backfire. For dealing with terrorism suspects, judicial mechanisms based on defensible principles, rather than expediency, must be developed.

Ninth, soldiers and officials must be prevented from desecrating Islamic holy symbols. Numerous such incidents are known to have taken place, exemplified by the flushing of a Koran down a toilet at Guantanamo. Fortunately the US military has officially recognised that this is extremely dangerous, due to the boost it provides to extremists. Of course, violation of rules in combat situations may be difficult to prevent. The award of knighthood to Salman Rushdie is another example of unwise provocation: it may or may not be justified on grounds of literary merit, but it instantly kindled Muslim anger.

Tenth, and finally, discriminating against Muslims living within Western societies is both morally wrong, and will only invite further radicalisation. One sees that Christians, Jews and Hindus are able to freely run private educational institutions in the US, but Muslim schools are viewed with much suspicion. A secular society must have no preferences between religions. Any perceived deviation from this is sufficient to convey to a minority group that it is an object of persecution. Indeed, paranoia is easily detectable in the US Muslim community. Education in the West must therefore be secular in word and spirit, and all schools should be open to all faiths. In other words, no religious schools should be permitted. Unfortunately there

is little chance of this at the moment, as US politics have become increasingly captive to the politics of born-again Christians who see the world through a biblical prism. The UK, too, needs to secularise itself, perhaps on the French model. Its multiculturalism is not working. Like Turkey, it should ban the veil in government buildings.

## What Muslims must do

There is little justice to be found in history. Nevertheless, sometimes nemesis doggedly pursues the past. Muslim states that had pushed the Islamist agenda are today besieged by the forces they helped to create.

Pakistan is the prime example. Twenty-five years ago, under a military regime, prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast during Ramadan, beards were encouraged, selections for academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was propagated through schoolbooks. But the same army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal, and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers. Since 2001, it has lost over a thousand men fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Slogans once common at army recruiting centres (for instance, *Jihad for Allah*) are now in the trash can, and bearded officers are losing out in promotions.

The rise of Islamic militancy in Pakistan owes much to the cowardly deference of Pakistani political leaders to mullah blackmail. Their instinctive response has been to seek appeasement. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto suddenly turned Islamic in his final days, as he made a desperate, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to save his government by banning alcohol, declaring Friday a holiday, and proclaiming Ahmadis as non-Muslims. Benazir Bhutto, fearing mullah backlash, made no attempt to challenge the horrific anti-woman Hudood and blasphemy laws during her premierships. And Mian Nawaz Sharif went a step further, by attempting to turn Pakistan into a Saudi Arabia by instituting sharia laws.

In Bangladesh, the Jamaat-i-Islami and Islamic Oikya Jote have been coalition partners of the BNP, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's party. During Khaleda Zia's third term, there was a rise in attacks on Ahmadis and Hindus, a ban on Ahmadi publications, and a rise in religious militancy in general. During her times in office, Khaleda Zia used her fundamentalist allies as weapons against Sheikh Hasina Wajed, her bitter political and personal rival. Both leaders bicker and accuse the other of encouraging terrorism, while refusing to face up to their own responsibilities. In all of this, the Jamaat has been the winner, having set up thousands of madrassas, thus giving a significant

impetus for training jihadist fighters who can fight causes around the world.

But blaming individual states and political leaders does not make for a satisfactory explanation of the huge rise in global Islamic militancy. One must seek reasons at a broader level. It is a sad truth that Muslims have little presence in today's world affairs, in science or in culture. This has led to diminished self-esteem, as well as increasing recourse to political Islam. Some dream of a new global caliphate. But the premises of this politics are false. Each blow inflicted by America after 9/11 has led Islamists to predict that the pain and humiliation will force all Muslims to close ranks, forget old grudges, purge traitors and renegades from their ranks, and generate a collective rage great enough to take on the power of today's governing civilisation. Each time, they have been dead wrong.

So what do Muslims need to do? A paradigm shift is essential. Muslims must realise that the awesome strength of Western civilisation – which also made possible its predatory imperialism – springs from accepting the premises of science and logic, respecting democratic institutions (at least within national borders), allowing value systems to evolve, and boldly challenging dogma without being condemned for blasphemy. They must connect the West's success with personal freedom and liberty, superior work ethics, artistic and scientific creativity, and the compulsive urge to innovate and experiment.

Muslims, if they are to be a part of mainstream civilisation, will have to adapt to a new universal cultural climate, one that accepts human rights as defined by the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the equality of men and women. On the part of Muslim minorities and immigrants to non-Muslim countries, this means acceptance of different behavioural norms, and a move away from the current tendency of ghettoisation and towards greater integration into the larger society.

Meanwhile, Muslims themselves must stop believing convoluted conspiracy theories that purport to explain their states of weakness. For example, it is widely held that today's sectarian warfare is a consequence of some cunningly remote manipulations by enemies of Islam. But in fact, the Shia-Sunni schism, and the first related bloodbath, followed almost immediately after the death of the Prophet Mohammad.

Muslims must also stop dreaming of theocracy and sharia law as solutions to their predicaments. This means acknowledging the sovereignty of the people rather than the rule of Allah, the latter by way of a self-appointed priesthood, such as *vilayat-e-faqih* and *khilafat-e-arz*. These are essentially prescriptions for a theocracy run by mullahs. It is simply impossible to run modern states while remaining shackled to medieval religious laws. Economic development, an expansion of individual liberties, democracy, an explosive growth in scientific knowledge and technological capabilities –

these and a host of other benefits will forever remain distant dreams without the modernisation of thought. The only way by which Muslim societies can become democratic, pluralistic and free from violent extremism is by going through their own internal struggles. Indigenous reform is difficult but possible. Islam is certainly as immutable as the Koran, but values held by Muslims have changed over the centuries.

## The role of the left

Looking down at planet Earth from above, one would see a bloody battlefield, where imperial might and religious fundamentalism are locked in bitter struggle. Whose victory or defeat should one wish for? There cannot be an unequivocal preference; each dispute must be looked at separately. And the answers seem to lie on the left of the political spectrum, as long as we are able to recognise what the left actually stands for.

The leftwing agenda is a positive one. It rests upon hope for a happier and more humane world that is grounded in reason, education and economic justice. It provides a sound moral compass to a world that is losing direction. One must navigate a course safely away from the xenophobes of the US and Europe – who see Islam as an evil to be suppressed or conquered – and also away from the large number of Muslims across the world who justify acts of terrorism and violence as part of asymmetric warfare.

No 'higher authority' defines the leftwing agenda, and no covenant of belief defines a 'leftist'. There is no card to be carried or oath to be taken. But secularism, universalistic ideas of human rights, and freedom of belief are non-negotiable. Domination by reasons of class, race, national origin, gender or sexual orientation are all equally unacceptable. In practical terms, this means that the left defends workers from capitalists, peasants from landlords, the colonised from the colonisers, religious minorities from state persecution, the dispossessed from the occupiers, women from male oppression, Muslims from Western Islamophobes, populations of Western countries from terrorists, and so on.

Mobilisation on the left is urgently needed at a time when extremists on both sides of the present divide have moved to centre stage. Even after the end of George W Bush's presidency, the Americans are bound to continue bombing Muslim lands. They think they can win. But their power, though large, is limited. Iraq has proven the point. On the other side, Islamist groups will continue to recruit successfully, so long as a large number of Muslims feel that they are being unfairly targeted, and that justice has ceased to matter in world affairs. America cannot win. Nor can the Islamists. It is for the left to bring sanity to the world, by rising above imperialism, xenophobia, cultural determinism and religious extremism, and drawing the attention of the people back onto their real problems. ▲