

Imperialism and Islamism – a View from the Left

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It is both healthy and necessary for the Left to keep seeking new utopias and to re-imagine the outlines of a future classless society. But to pretend away the ugliness of the real world – or to think that all conflict today is class conflict – will get us nowhere. Current left-wing discourses give little time to a conflict that is already very important and is likely to dominate the foreseeable future – the war between radical Islam and everybody else. This includes modernism in all its shapes and forms, as well as socialism and progressive Islam.

A left-wing analysis that is reasoned, informed, and humane is missing. And so, between the xenophobes and Muslim-haters of the West on the one hand, and the illogic of Islamic radicals on the other, the choices get grimmer.

Angry at the rapaciousness of imperialism and the horrors it has wrought upon the world, some in the Left are supporting anything and everything that purports to fight America. For them, the badge of virtue belongs to those who berate America with every breath. Thus they implicitly side with religious radicals in Pakistan, oppose the pro-democracy movement in Iran, and call for Afghanistan to be turned over to the Taliban. One finds the appalling assertion that the Taliban are spearheading national liberation struggles in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that Hezbollah and Hamas deserve unqualified support from the international left. However, little sympathy is shown for the Muslim Uighurs of Sinkiang, presumably because China still lies in the good books of some leftists.

Anti-Americanism is not illogical or baseless. People across the world have excellent reason to feel negatively about the United States which, in pursuit of its self-interest, has waged illegal wars for decades. It has bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants, undermined movements for progressive change, and felt free to kidnap, torture, imprison, and kill anywhere in the world with impunity. Pursuing the goal of total planetary control, the U.S. military currently operates more than 900 installations in 46 countries, in addition to over 4600 bases in the U.S. homeland and territories. All this while talking about supporting democracy and human rights.

America has a bloody history of interventions: in tiny Vietnam, the US killed millions. In Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala it operated through death squads. In Iran, at the behest of Standard Oil, the US overthrew the legitimately elected prime minister of Mohammed Mossadeq. In the Middle East the US helped Israel in systematically dispossessing the Palestinians of their land and reduced them to their present state of agony and helplessness. Recently, it stood aside and watched as Israel reduced Gaza to rubble using aircraft provided by the US. A war waged on false pretexts devastated Iraq. And there is much more.

And so if I was a Palestinian in 1948, an Iranian in 1953, a Vietnamese in the 1960's, or an Iraqi in 2003, I would have no doubt in my mind that fighting the Americans was absolutely right. This war of liberation would be inspired by the goal of protecting

national resources and territory against predators, although one would want it also to aimed at creating a better, freer, and more just society.

But nothing in the world stays fixed – even the most distant stars in the sky actually move. One must not assume that international politics has eternally fixed aggressors and victims, or pretend that we live in the age of 19th century maritime imperial powers. Predatory imperialism inspired by the need to furiously export capital – as brilliantly explained by Lenin in 1916 – was indeed yesterday’s threat to global peace. But today there are other forces as well.

Religion lies at the base of much conflict today. Christian fundamentalists attack abortion clinics in the US and kill doctors; Jewish settlers holding the Old Testament in one hand, and Uzis in the other, burn olive orchards and drive Palestinians off their ancestral land; Hindus in India demolish ancient mosques, burn down churches and slaughter both Muslims and Christians; Sri Lankan Buddhists slaughtered Tamil Hindu separatists.

In this particular epoch of human history, it is violent Islamic radicalism that is the most dangerous. Its breeding grounds are everywhere and it is imbedded into communities, both in the West and in Muslim countries. In the next several decades the world is likely to see the battle between religious fanatics and everybody else – progressive and practicing Muslims particularly – become ever more intense. It is surely time to move away from fixed dogmas and yesterday’s thinking.

LEFT-WING CONFUSIONS

As a product of the Age of Enlightenment, the Left is obligated to uphold reason and the scientific method. It must therefore let facts hold sway over belief. But sadly, even with evidence staring in the face, some comrades seem locked into a state of denial, choosing to direct all their anger towards America and the West – no matter what.

A personal example: a video had just been broadcast on Pakistani television channels (May, 2009). It showed a 17-year old girl in Swat writhing and screaming in pain as a hefty, hooded, Talib thug mercilessly flogged her . She was accused of going to a market unaccompanied by an “allowed” or *mehram* male member of the family. A rare protest demonstration by Islamabad’s embattled secularists and left-wingers followed. Fearing the suicide bomber, and challenged by hostile students from a nearby *madrassa*, the small but noisy crowd made its way towards the Presidency. But every cry from one side “Down with Taliban” would find an echo, “Down with America”, from other protesters of the same group. Onlookers were probably confused whether it was the Moulana Fazlullah or Barack Obama that had ordered the flogging.

There are bigger examples. Hugo Chavez certainly gained the admiration of the international left (and mine too, I might add) for standing up to American bullying in Venezuela, but he was exceedingly short-sighted in defending Ahmadinejad against the unconscionable election rigging in Iran. Robert Mugabe, known for his cronyism and widespread use of torture, still receives support from parts of the Left because of his bluster against Britain.

To push their agenda, several popular left-wing writers twist and warp facts in a manner that leaves one gasping. I shall give only two examples here: that of Pepe Escobar and Eric Margolis.

Escobar writes in his 8 May 2009 column that *“The wily Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM - Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law), led by Sufi Muhammad, managed to regiment Swat valley landless peasants to fight for their rights and economic redistribution against the usual wealthy, greedy, feudal landlords who happened to double as local politicians and government officials.”*

To any one who knows the facts: far from being “wily”, Sufi is a semi-senile idiot who led thousands of tribal fighters to their death by American forces in Afghanistan, and who even the Taliban now consider an embarrassment after their debacle in Swat. As for redistributing seized lands, properties, and captured women (Escobar omits this!): handing out war booty is a tactic that Islamists used to swell their ranks. The fact is that the declared Taliban agenda has no mention of social justice and economic development, creating jobs for the unemployed, building homes, providing education, or doing away with feudalism and tribalism. The Taliban seek to build a religious fascist state in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Escobar probably couldn’t care less because he won’t have to live there.

As my second example, take Margolis’s column of 19 May 2009. He writes *“Last week, Pakistan finally bowed to Washington’s angry demands to unleash its military against rebellious Pashtun tribesmen of Northwest Frontier Province(NWFP) – who are collectively mislabeled ‘Taliban’ in the west. They are not the Afghan Taliban, but it’s convenient for the western media and Pentagon to slap that label on them....Equally ominous, a poor people’s uprising spreading across Pakistan – also mislabeled ‘Taliban’ – threatens a radical national rebellion similar to India’s spreading Maoist Naxalite rebellion.”*

Sorry Mr. Margolis, your ignorance of facts is appalling. Contrary to the claim of being “mislabeled” as Taliban by the western media, those at war against the Pakistani state as well as its society are not ashamed to call themselves Taliban. They have a declared organization called the Pakistani Taliban Movement (*Tehreek-e-Taliban*), and have proudly claimed credit as Taliban fighters for suicide bombings of many funerals, rival mosques, hospitals, and public gatherings. After blowing up 350 girls schools they say they will blow up still more. Sadly, like Escobar, Margolis fantasizes these religious fanatics to be social revolutionaries.

Such blind support for anti-people organizations and movements grievously harms the credibility of the Left. There are examples from the past – such as international left’s support for the hideous Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot. The fact that these crimes were brought to our attention by the mainstream western media does not mean that the reporting was untruthful. Surely, a spade must be called a spade.

WHY RADICAL ISLAM?

Many of us on the Left 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 they are indisputable. Those condemned to living a life with little hope and happiness are indeed terribly vulnerable to calls from religious demagogues who offer a happy hereafter in exchange for unquestioning obedience.

Much harder to accept is the claim that all problems come from Western imperialist domination, past and present. The premise is that if West accepts guilt for colonialism and mends its ways, the conflict will disappear. This is plain wrong. 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 are key. The most dangerous religious radicalism is deliberately produced by carefully cultivating grievances, both real and imagined, by the fulminations of religious ideologues to which the poor and rich are both susceptible. The systematic conditioning of minds has been frenetically propagated by religious ideologues in mosques, madrassas and over the internet. This has created a climate wherein external causes are automatically held responsible for every ill 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.

Islamic radicalism may be bad news for Washington. But it is much worse for Muslims because it pits Muslims against Muslims, as well as against the world at large. Only peripherally directed against the excesses of corrupt Muslim ruling establishments, and taking purely opportunistic advantage of existing injustices and inequities, the primary targets of extremists today are other Muslims living within Muslim countries. Some religious fanatics terrorise and kill others who belong to the “wrong” Muslim sect. The Shia-Sunni conflict accounts for the majority of those killed in Iraq. In Bangladesh, religious fanatics set off 400 bombs in public places in just one day. These fanatics accuse “modernised Muslims” of being vectors of hellish sinfulness – the so-called *jahiliya* – deserving the full wrath of God. The greatest ire among them is aroused by the simplest of things, such as women being allowed to walk around bare-faced, being educated, or the very notion that they could be considered the equal of men. What on earth has this to do with imperialism?

Contrary to its claims, Islamic radicalism is indifferent to the suffering of Muslims; the victims of suicide bombings are often those praying mosques or at funerals. 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.

During relief efforts after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, my students and I encountered people in desperate situations who refused help because they would be touched by the infidels who eat pork, drink wine, and whose women had uncovered faces. In particular, etched in my memory is the face of the old man who told his son that he would rather die than let his gangrenous leg be amputated by a group of Cuban doctors that had flown in to help. He was eventually taken to an Iranian relief team but it was too late.

Blindness to facts is by no means a prerogative of extremist Muslims: a majority of Americans had uncritically rallied around George Bush after 9/11 and then agreed to go to war in Iraq although, 1)The existence of WMD's was a transparent fake, 2)Saddam's involvement in 911 was a concocted lie, but many Americans still like to believe that it is true, 3)The Iraq war was illegal under international law. For a majority of Americans, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and the Blackwater murders are just tiny blips on their radar screens. The American media focuses upon the 3500 Americans killed in Iraq but rarely mentions the horrific toll of Iraqis which, by one estimate, exceeds 600,000.

But, while the mainstream media and writers can cover up for their side and lie and deceive, the Left does not have this option. Like the Pope we have no army divisions – and even less money. Instead, our potential power lies in providing help to oppressed peoples using clarity of thought and taking the moral high ground. We cannot do even this without introspection and being honest to ourselves.

WHAT WOULD AN ISLAMIST VICTORY BRING?

My question is to those leftists who want to see a Taliban victory.

In my opinion, an Islamist victory would transport some countries into the darkest of dark ages. The fanatics dream of transforming the world into a religious state where they will be the law. In Pakistan they stone women to death, cut off limbs, kill doctors for administering polio shots, force girl-children into burqa, threaten beard-shaving barbers with death, blow up girls schools, forbid music, punish musicians, destroy 2000-year statues. Even flying kites is a life-threatening sin.

If the militants of Afghanistan and Pakistan, or of Iraq and Egypt, ever win it is clear what the future will be like. Education, bad as it is today, would at best be replaced by the mind-numbing indoctrination of the madrassas whose gift to society would be an army of suicide bombers. In a society policed by vice-and-virtue squads, music, art, drama, and cultural expressions would disappear. Countries would re-tribalize, and all social progress would be wiped out.

The hatred of Islamists for the West must never be mistaken as a call for equality or class struggle. Hitler and Mussolini too waged war against America – after wiping out the communists. But Muslims tolerate Islamists because they claim to fight for Islam. This is

sad because the fanatics know nothing of the diversity and creative richness of Muslims, whether today or in the past. Intellectual freedom led to science, architecture, medicine, arts and crafts, and literature that were the hallmark of Islamic civilization in its golden age. Progress was possible in those times because of an open-minded, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural character. Caliphs, such as Haroon-al-Rashid and Al-Mamoun, brought together scholars of diverse faiths and helped establish a flourishing culture. Today's self-declared *amir-ul-momineen*, like Mullah Omar, would gladly behead great Islamic scholars like Ibn Sina and Al-Razi for heresy and burn their books.

HOW SHOULD THE LEFT LOOK AT ISLAMISM?

A nuanced, critical, and impartial left-wing agenda is needed. What principles should the Left owe its moral allegiance to? I would propose the following essentials:

1. Theocratic rule is totally unacceptable. Only those who struggle, whether hard or softly, for creating a secular society run by rules made by humans properly belong to the Left.
2. Women's rights are non-negotiable. Any system which forbids women to show their faces, receive education, work outside the home, drive in a car or ride in a taxi, go to a market, or be treated by a male doctor, grossly violates rights that lie at the essence of civilized human existence. These are universal rights, and the claim that these are mere "bourgeois rights" is wrong and unacceptable.
3. Oppressed peoples and communities wronged by the West, or by any locally dominant power, should be strongly supported. But this should not translate into uncritical support for organizations that purport to represent their interests. There should be no blank checks for any protagonist, just a case-by-case critical appraisal. In certain complex cases, it is better to have no opinion than a wrong opinion.
4. Militarism must be opposed. With the US still in the lead, several countries are embarked on a reckless pursuit for advanced weaponry while neglecting the needs of their people.
5. Class struggle is by no means dead and the Left rightly believes in economic justice. Whereas social and economic classes very much exist, their definitions vary much more widely than was possible for Marx to anticipate. Space-age and stone-age societies share the same planet, and the criteria for social justice must be continuously re-invented.

In conclusion, the left-wing 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. Being a product of Enlightenment thought, it insists on democratic politics and shared values for all humans.

No 'higher authority' defines the left 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 unacceptable. In practical terms, this means that the Left defends the dispossessed from the occupiers, the colonised from the colonisers, Muslims from Western Islamophobes, populations of Western countries from terrorists, workers from capitalists, peasants from landlords, religious minorities from state persecution, women from male oppression, and so on.

It is for the Left to bring sanity to the world by opposing imperialism, religious extremism, xenophobia, and cultural determinism. Its role should be to draw the attention of people back onto their real problems through encouraging critical reasoning and promoting universal human values.

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