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Squaring the circle: engaging radical Islam

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Abstract

The overwhelming feeling in the West, at the moment, is that we are set for a long and arduous duel with radical Islam in various fronts and in various forms. This is manifested not only in the conflict dynamics in the Middle East but also in the heart of Europe where a section of second generation Muslims have turned ánti-national´. Apart form the obvious physical confrontation there appears to be another profound dimension in this conflict. This is reflected at the ideological level. The ideological certitude of radical Islam is now matched by liberal conservatism that easily assumes a confrontational position while dealing with the former.

This paper outlines the conceptual framework for a critical approach to radical Islam. Starting with a discussion on question of identity among the Islamic community in the West, it argues that breakdown of a sense of belonging among radical Islamists (in functional terms) needs to be seen in conjunction with the failure of the state to reach out to them (in institutional terms). On a larger plain the distancing away of the Islamic community from the larger international community is a product of ill conceived policy response of the West. Rebuilding this strained relationship, I argue, although complex and arduous, is not an impossible one. Four substantial composite strategies of 'constructive engagement' with radical Islam are detailed in this paper. Taken together, they propose a 'holistic response' to the overall challenge. Finally, in conclusion I summarise the key points of the argument and alert to the drawbacks and dangers of over reliance on military option as the sole response mechanism against radical Islam.

Key Words: Conflict, Co-operation, Islam, Minorities, Muslim, National Identity, the West

Anxiety on Identity

Radical Islam has a broad sweep. It has dominated the political process in both the Islamic and non-Islamic world. Given the interconnectedness of the contemporary international society any actions undertaken by a given group has come to have deep reverberations across this connected landscape. Paradoxical as it may seem radical Islam has brought about more harm within the Muslim world than its non-Muslim counterpart. However, it is the 'home-grown' variety of radical Islam that has proved to be most challenging of all. Although Muslims have been the overwhelming victims of this politics of radicalism any discussion about radical Islam would be incomplete

if we were to bypass the 'Muslim Question" in the West. Put simply, one ought not to confine oneself to the discussion of radical Islam as something that is prevalent in another geography or a locale that is far away. The challenge posed by radical Islam to the overall working of the West is many. Thus it would be natural to interrogate the politics of radicalism in this particular context. I begin by examining the very process which has led to the rise of this radicalism.

The West's present preoccupation with radical Islam is marked by confusion, misunderstanding and unexamined assumptions. In this context, it is pertinent that we have a clear and coherent understanding of radical Islam and its adherents if we were to seek solutions to countering it. There is a prevalent assumption in the West that roots of radical Islam go back to the cultural moorings of Islam itself. Although a powerful argument, this position needs revisiting. As Olivier Roy points out radical Islam is not a by-product of something inherent in Islam or of its cultural heritage. Radical Islam, he would have us believe is a product of the challenges thrown up by forces of globalisation. Radical Islam has emerged, in Roy's view, because Islam has become "deterritorialised" in such a way as to throw open the whole question of Muslim identity (Roy 2004).

From a non-Islamic perspective, the question of identity that Roy highlights pervades each and every individual or community that finds itself "footloose", "in-between" states. Unable to anchor oneself in any particular milieu one either develops a form of rootless cosmopolitan attitude or becomes deeply indignant to ones surroundings. Seen or viewed in this context radical Islam would appear to be a form of deep and violent resentment against the prevalent conditions. It is in these circumstances that the quest for identity on the part of the Muslims finds

manifestation in violent activism. As Fukuyama puts it "radical Islamism and *jihadism* arise in response to the resulting quest for identity. Those ideologies can answer the question of "Who am I?" posed by a young Muslim in Holland or France: you are a member of a global *umma* defined by adherence to a universal Islamic doctrine that has been striped of all of its local customs, saints, traditions and the like (Fukuyama 2007: 27-8).

It is pertinent to ask why this quest for identity affects only a particular section of Muslims in the West and not all. Equally importantly, why Islamic radicalism is prevalent among the second and third generation Muslims but not the original migrants? This could be answered in two different ways. First, the original Muslim migrants had made a voluntary decision when they moved to the West. Thus they were aware of losing a part of their cultural inheritance and heritage and were prepared for it. The second or third generation born into them owing to their place of birth did not have that choice of chosen culture or geography. Thus some of them when confronted with the everyday Western values in the public spaces and the values of their religion within the close confines of home found it hard to reconcile the two varied experiences. Stuck between these two cultures with which they cannot identify, they find a strong appeal in the universalist ideology of contemporary *jihadism* (Fukuyama 2007: 28).Some chose to embrace their parents' original faith and cultural tradition fully and in the process developed a passionate resentment against the non-Islamic values.

One needs to interrogate the political culture of Europe as well in order to assess its effectiveness in terms of providing a framework of assimilation for Muslims and other outsiders. A close scrutiny of the said culture would suggest that although

most of Western European states have remained committed to liberalism and politics of multiculturalism instead of assimilation, it encourages "plural monoculturalism". These polities, to quote, Fukuyama, "tend to conceive of multiculturalism as a framework for the coexistence of separate cultures rather than a transitional mechanism for integrating newcomers into a dominant culture (Fukuyama 2007: 29). This segregated multiculturalism, thus, continues to maintain the "us" and them "narrative" and maintains a strict an institutional cultural divide.

Unsurprisingly this narrative has made both Muslims and their host suspicious and sceptical of each other. "Many Europeans express scepticism about whether Muslim immigrants want to integrate, yet those who do want to are not always eagerly welcomed, even if they have acquired the language and cultural knowledge of the host society (Fuluyama 2007: 29). This argument finds resonance in works of other writers too. According to Yasmin Hussain and Paul Bagguley, "to be a citizen means to relate to the state in exactly the same way as others, yet for individuals belonging to any particular religious, cultural or ethnic community there may be little or no recognition from the state (Hussain & Bagguley 2005: 414-15)".

Plenty of Muslim youths who are radicalised by their imams or preachers entertain this framework of silent segregation. Given this narrative of "plural mononculturalism" and reluctance of the host society to embrace the Muslims fully as equal members of the society the radical preachers succeeded in reinforce the "us" and "them" division with far more vigour. This estrangement has in many ways made the converts to radicalism ignore any "responsibility" towards the host society. Since many of the second and third generation radical Muslims were born in the West and hold nationalities of their place of birth one cannot force them out of the political

map. As some critics have put it "Europe's failure to better integrate its Muslims is a ticking time bomb (Fukuyama 2007: 30). Contemporary agendas of inclusion must now also engage with the "politics of recognition: (Bond 2006: 609). Since they are a part and parcel of this society and the smooth functioning of the West's overall economic, cultural and political order is hostage to some of these radical elements we ought to engage in some form of institutional and cultural reform in order to avoid further distancing away of this section of our population.

Intellectual Bridge Building

A constructive engagement with radical Islam also needs to take into account an intellectual exchange. This embodies an intellectual exchange not between the West and the Islam but within the world of Islam. Engaging with radical Islam is a form of 'reaching out'. It involves establishing a connection, facilitating a debate and entering a process of understanding. Pursued in an atmosphere devoid of threat such encounters are bound to produce positive outcome. However, given the fact that both the West and the radical Islamists come from two polar opposite intellectual backgrounds 'reaching out' to each other can be an arduous enterprise in the best of times. In such situations, the best possible strategy to counter this problem would be to nominate emissaries from the Islamic community itself to introduce the message of dialogue.

Radical Islamists have always, chosen selected episodes from the Qura'n and the Islamic tradition that are important to them. This selective reading has often times been the basis of their activism. This selective approach can be countered by confronting them from within the Islamic teaching which includes the Muslim holy

book of Qura'n, the books on jurisprudence and similar other sources. An intellectual interrogation of radical Islam stands a good chance of success if it is undertaken by other Muslim intellectuals.

Muslim scholars who are well versed both in Islamic and Western philosophies and jurisprudence are best placed to be emissary of this exchange. In recent years there have emerged some fearless Islamic scholars who have questioned the dominant narrative of failure of Islam to that of the power and importance of the West. They have challenged the dominant thinking which treats the decline of Islamic culture and power to that of the manipulation of the West.[1] They have steadfastly argued against this 'blame game'. Some of these scholars have dared to question the basis of this "self pity" or the "cult of victimhood" whose dominant reading is to treat the West primarily as an enemy adversary. This narrative they have argued has, precluded any possibility of entertaining the West's importance as a source or repository of modernity, tolerance, accommodating culture and most importantly of advanced thinking in the world of ideas. Such ostracism and self-imposed isolation is partly responsible for the current wave of radicalism.

These thinkers are the true reformers of contemporary Islam. Containing radical Islam requires that the West cultivate these intellectuals to introduce the seeds of alternative reform with the hope that it will eventual unleash the powers of peaceful transformation. Apart from cultivating these emissaries the West also needs to put the burden of owning up to radical Muslims on the Islamic community as a whole. There is a growing tendency among Muslims to deny that radical Islamic elements have anything to do with Islam. In other words, by denouncing them they have absolved

[1] See, for instance Samir Kassir's *Being Arab*, London: Verso, 2006.

themselves from any moral responsibility one could create the condition for Islamists to put a barrier against the radicalism of their brethrens. Moderate Muslims feel that to criticise their own people in any ways is letting the side down (Bilgrami 2003: 90). According to Ziauddin Sardar, "Islamic radicals or terrorists place a unique burden on Muslims. To deny 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 is a refusal to live in the real world (Sardar 2005: 11). The onus, therefore, is on Muslims, to oppose the fundamentalist and radical elements even that means undertaking urgent reform. Reaching out to radical Islam and persuade them to scale back from their radicalism, need not be the sole task of the West alone. This burden should be shared in equal measures with the Muslims community as a whole.

In recent years a majority of Muslims reflecting on the rhetoric of violence have manifestly denounced the readings of radical Islam as incorrect, non-Islamic and very little to do with the overall preaching of the prophet Mohammad. Such blanket intellectual denunciation while discrediting the activism of radicals does not go far enough. To win over the radicals the Islamic community in general and those in the West in particular have to engage them in an intellectual debate whereby they could be made to understand their "mistaken" beliefs which fuels their radical activism. Radical Muslims need to be cautioned by the spiritual and intellectual community within the world of Islam that their reasoning for an asymmetric confrontation against the West is unjustified and glorification violence utterly perverse and abhorrent (Parekh 2004: 21).

Although such policy recommendation appears simple those Muslims who are expected to take this message to the radical elements within the community find

themselves in an extremely complicated scenario. As Bilgrami points out "most moderate Muslims are torn between their dislike for fundamentalist visions of their religion and societies on the one hand, and, on the other, their deep defensive feelings of resentment against forces that they perceive to be alien and hostile in one colonial form or another for a very long time, forces that have often supported the fundamentalists when it suited their political agendas (Bilgrami, 2003: 91)". Thus the insistence on secular and moderate Muslims to contain the radical elements within their faith needs to have a corresponding sense of fair play on the part of the West.

Dialogue on Reciprocity

There is a general thinking that the Islamic world is fairly monolithic. Many in the West appear to assume that Islamic countries are homogenous in terms of their religion. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Although most Islamic states have been fairly discriminatory against those belonging to other faiths, these polities nonetheless continue to have non-Muslim minorities. Islamic Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria and Sudan have all homes to a fair amount of Christians, Hindus, Jews and other minorities. Unsurprisingly given these states' professed religion and the current wave of anti-Western sentiment plenty of these minorities experience everyday forms of formal and informal violence. These range from mob attack, burning of their places of worship, subject to the harsh Shari'a law, forced exclusion from the political space and so on.[2]

[2] Even in secular Iraq under the leadership of Saddam Hussain and his Prime Minister Tariq Aziz Christians and Jews fared no better. They underwent 'decades of religious and ethnic discrimination, outright attack on their villages, gassing, land confiscation, and dynamiting of churches'. Eden Naby, 'The Plight of Christians in Iraq', *New York Review of Books*, vol. 53, no. 19, November 30 2006.

Although news of their ill treatment often appear in the Western press do appear from time to time it does not elicit any major interference. By and large the secular Western polities treat these as human rights violations and if at all they react against these irregularities they cloak it in that particular language. If one were to reach out to the Islamic world and thereby counter the influence of radical Islam by default it is pertinent that there is stress on the treatment of these minorities. In spite of the danger of being called 'conservative', 'bigot, 'crude', and 'radical', one needs to stress the importance of making the Islamic world realise its 'responsibilities' within the framework of 'reciprocity'.

Given their commitment to human rights and secular attitude to religion all Western societies have non-discriminatory practices when it comes to the treatment of various religious groups within their polities. Thus Animists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims (or any other religion for that matter) receive the same treatment from the state. In addition, owing to the prevalence of the 'politics of multiculturalism' the minorities are allowed to continue with their religio-cultural practices even if that, at times, blocks the state's preferred ideology of secularism. If one were to engage with the Muslim polities next to Europe's borders and beyond it is vital that our politicians and policy makers make the former aware of the 'duties' and 'obligations' of the state.

True, Europe has a long history of ill treatment of its minorities and those who opposed Christianity: stretching from the Crusades, through inquisition, committing Jews to ghettos and finally the concentration camps. But this flawed past need not hold it back from raising concerns about the 'evils' of discrimination. If anyone, Europe, owing to its 'dark history' (Mazower 1998) is in a better position to speak out against persecution of minorities in Islamic states.

In recent times the Pope Benedict has been at the forefront of this debate. The Pope, in fact, 'has given heart to a growing body of people who demand "reciprocity" in relations between the Islamic world and the West. This thinking and argument can be summed up in the following manner: since Muslim minorities are free to practise their faith in historically Christian countries, the Western world should expect Islamic countries to show more respect for the rights of local Christians, Jews and other minorities' (The Economist 2006: 13). If one were to start a 'sustained dialogue', with ones Islamic counterparts this message needs to be delivered. One ought to resist the temptation of conveying this message within a 'tit for tat' framework. What one could do is to highlight the underlying commonality between the Islamic world and the West.

Exploring common ties and interests between parties with diametrically opposite views often lead to a process of sustained interaction. In the event of these parties, groups, entities or polities coming together can reflect on a problem better than the easy arrangement of non-interference and non-engagement. In the current environment both the Islamic world and the West suffer from such a spurious history. If we were successful in reaching out to the Islamic world by way of this issue of "treatment of minorities" it can open up possibilities of tackling other serious issues. In the long run, as Britain's conservative newspaper The Economist put it "a settled, law-abiding Muslim population in the West, and content, secure religious minorities in the Islamic world, can be counters to the view that every place "belongs" to just one faith or culture (The Economist 2006: 13).

Democracy and Dissent

Our current thinking about radical Islam purports that the former is a product of politics of authoritarianism. Authoritarian politics, it is argued, breeds discontent. This, at times, is externalised. The result, bouts of external violence in the form of terror strikes. Introducing democracy and making Muslims appreciate its values, it is argued, can and indeed be a counterweight to any kind of religious radicalism. The current debates about democratising the Middle East and the larger authoritarian Islamic world, it would appear, rides on that thinking.

Let me broaden this discussion by underscoring the West's complicity in the promotion of 'radical Islam'. For over fifty years the West has consistently thwarted the voice of democracy in the Islamic world, not owing to any greater good for humanity for purely for promotion of national interest. This policy, it would appear, is still the favoured option of the West. The US support for the authoritarian Saudi regime, military ruler of Pakistan and a soft dictator in Egypt are all cases in point. Unsurprisingly, in recent years, a large constituency of 'radical elements wanting to undermine the West' have come from these polities.

The ´battle for hearts and mind´ in the Islamic world is now won not only by the West which introduced the process of democratisation and free speech, but by the radical conservative elements such as *Hamas* and *Hezbollah*. How are we to explain this paradoxical development? Where did liberal West go wrong? One way of self-introspection would be to critically reflect on our policies and attitudes. It would not be incorrect to argue that liberal conservatism is equally blinded by rage and

irrationality like its orthodox Islamic counterpart. Owing to this position, we, as the votaries of this new ideology have lost plenty of good will and found ourselves in an ideological as well as military quagmire.

The election victory of *Hamas* in the Palestinian Territory and growing popularity of *Hezbollah* in Lebanon highlight how successive interfering by West have failed to countenance the likelihood of radical political parties to win victory through the ballot box. What accounts for the emergence of the hitherto 'terrorist fronts' to assume a moral mandate through democratic means? We must realise, in this context, which some Islamic societies will sometimes choose radical parties to form government and assume the voice of the people in the hope of mitigating the ineffectiveness of previous pro-Western parties who were at the helm of government. Instead of making a reasoned response to these radical parties we have had a knee jerk reaction. By refusing to recognise the legitimacy of *Hamas* we have not only undermined the central tenets of democracy but appeared as patent hypocrites. Our refusal to entertain the rise of *Hamas* to the principles of democracy is deeply flawed.

While one cannot undermine the merits of democracy it would be worth asking what our take on participatory democracy is. For therein lie answers to some of the fundamental problems with radical Islam. Reflecting on West's policy towards Islamic polities and the 'democratisation project' plenty of liberal thinkers and observers in our time have commented that we are democrats at home dictators abroad. At one extreme we consider dictatorships are the best bulwark against radical Islam and at the other we taut the merits of democracy as that would modernise the hitherto traditional Islamic societies and help them inch away from radical thinking.

But, as and when, a party comes to power through democracy we feel terribly disturbed. If anything, this mode of thinking is manifestly erroneous.

That contemporary Western response to democracy in the Islamic world is ill advised, deeply flawed and at best myopic. We assume that *Hamas* (given its anti-Israeli rhetoric) will govern poorly. It may. But its electoral success shows that it is genuine about the needs of the Palestinians. If we were to contain radical Islam we should be prepared to interact directly with those who represent it. Our refusal to recognise Hamas and castigating it as 'illegitimate' has not done us any favour. At best we have succeeded in closing that slim window of opportunity that was present.

In the current climate of deep anxiety and mistrust of Muslims in the West there is a tendency to associate every form of democratic dissent among the Muslims as reactionary, radical and threatening to the overall secular worldview and interest of the West. This assumption again is deeply flawed. As Fred Halliday argues "much of what is presented as the Islamic critique of the West has little or nothing to do with religion: it is secular, often nationalist, protest and none the less valid for that. Support for Palestine, denunciations of Western hegemony in the oil market, solidarity against the war in Iraq, opposition to Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in the past, denunciations of cultural imperialism, protests at double standards on human rights – these are all part of the 'Muslim' indictment of the West, but are not necessarily religious in content, or specific to the Muslim world (Halliday 1999: 899)". Yet we prefer to see a larger and evil plot in all these forms of protestations.

Such half baked uneducated thinking has not only prevented us from appreciating the contributions made by a section of the populace that has highlighted

the controversial nature of such undertakings and involvements but also undermined any deeper dialogue between various constituencies in a democratic polity. Being ignored, denounced and labelled as anti-Western and thus 'radical' for entertaining a democratic opposition to certain policy matters a section of those 'conscientious' participants have felt emasculated. Unsurprisingly, a section from that constituency has retreated to the world of radical activism in the form of random terrorism. Countering such forces requires us to re-examine our policy postures on certain issues which have the tendency to affect the wider Muslim interest. We ought to recognise that the Muslims have as much right to feel aggrieved if the interest of their fellow Muslims is undermined elsewhere in the world; as our own liberal views on violation of human rights in the wider international society.

Breaking the Poverty Trap

Although the West provides safe havens to Muslims to practice their faith, has ensured equality in socio-economic and political sphere it has not succeeded in mitigating the former's memories of a different religio-cultural and geographical narrative. The rise of radical Islam in the West can be seen in the context of displacement. Being uprooted from their natural landscapes (albeit through voluntary decision) Muslims in the West have found it very hard to develop a sense of national identity in the host state. In such a situation Islam has become alternative identity form Muslims alienated by the secular non-binding liberal Western system, and in time have come to assume an ideology and a system for organised resistance against the state or the political process.

Although the issue of alienation is important the narrative of Islamic radicalism in the West is a complex one. It cannot be pinned to the war against modernism as many social scientists, policy makers and politicians would like to have us believe. At one level it has received fillip by way of the West's complicity in the disorder and power play in the world of Islam (Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf States and the list goes on).

Social scientists and policy makers have consistently underscored the relationship between poverty and discontent. In some instances poverty has been found to be a catalyst in pushing people to many radical revolutionary uprisings. Could there be such a link between poverty stricken Muslim masses and their conversion to radical ideology? The simple and clearest answer to that would be an emphatic 'Yes'. I would highlight two empirical evidences to validate the above argument. Most of the early Taleban leaders in Afghanistan had experiences of extreme poverty (Misra 2004). In fact, it was led primarily by displaced *Pushtun* young men who had grown up in destitution and squalor of refugee camps in Pakistan and had managed to survive by way a free education and maintenance in the radical *Wahhabi* Madrashas that dotted the frontier towns of Pakistan along the Afghan border.

Similarly, in the North Caucasus (Chechnya and North Ossettia) decades of poverty, unemployment, institutional decay created a vacuum of dissent which was filled by the radical Wahhabi and Shahidist[3] ideology. These two not only provided metaphysical succour to the impoverished and alienated Chechen and Ossett

[3] The Shahidists are one of the most extreme radical groups in Northern Caucasus. Since they emphasize a great deal of martyrdom as a means of self fulfillment and religious obligation their contribution to hostage taking, suicide bombing, killing of innocent civilians and children have become a regular occurrence in Russia in particular and North Caucasus in general.

insurgents but made allowances for their economic well being owing to the introduction of Saudi money. As one study puts it "the chronic problems of unemployment and institutional weakness of mainstream Islam after sixty years of persecution by the Soviet regime which left Russia vulnerable to the mass influx for foreign Islamic missionaries and Islamic teachers from countries where extremism had taken root (Figes 2006: 76)".

When we shift our attention closer home we are confronted with the stark reality that a significant majority of the radical Muslims are poor, uneducated, marginalised in terms of economic opportunities and life chances and largely an alienated lot.[4] This economic denial in the face of opulence in many ways drives young Muslims to the folds of radical rhetoric. Of late, many critics have argued about Muslims lack of integration in the mainstream. What is needed to be highlighted here is the absence of a framework or mechanism that allows Muslims to attain a basic level of economic sufficiency at par with some of their non-Muslim counterparts in the West. Some form of economic affirmative action would certainly go a long way in assuaging the dissent of these Muslims and be a barrier against radical rhetoric of some preachers.

Politics of Liberal Conservatism

Engaging with radical Islam also requires us to enter into some form of self-censorship. In our obsession with individual freedom we have given into the temptation open criticism, finger-pointing, take a holier than thou attitude and most alarming of all publicise our unexamined half baked ideas about certain cultures,

[4] The 2001 & 2002 race riots in Bradrod and Burnley in the UK and the 2005 riots by north-African Muslims in France were undertaken mostly by these economic disadvantageous and deprived youth.

religions and people in the public domain. The only thing this form of intellectual activism does is to add further fuel to the fire. Given the power of the print and visual media as the medium of mass conversion such shallow thinking has not only contributed to the skewed imagination of an entire community of people in the West but has allowed radical Islamists to manipulate the situation by equating this entire constituency as inherently anti-Islam.

Radical Islam is a reaction against this professed moral superiority of the West which has been peddled by many of its spokespersons who have little or no understanding of the "real" situation. There is an overwhelming tendency among the Western intellectuals and policy makers to discredit Islam at every turn. In fact, attributing Islam various superlatives has almost become a pastime among this lot. As Pankaj Mishra warns us "big words like 'Salafist totalitarianism', and 'Islamo-fascism' certainly help project the illusion of profound knowledge. They probably also satisfy the nostalgic desire of some sedentary writers to seem themselves in the avant-garde of a noble crusade against an evil 'ism'. But they do not deepen our understanding of the diverse nature of Muslim societies or of the schisms and contradictions within those we call radical Islam (Mishra 2006)".

Such a bold and hectic display of prejudice and ignorance, as Mishra reiterates "is now commonplace in elite liberal-left as well as conservative circles in the government and media (Mishra 2006). Since the attacks on the twin towers and US interest on that watershed day of 11 September 2001 it has become commonplace on the part of many non-Muslim interpreters of Islam and politics of Islam to attribute the rise of indiscriminate violence to the very roots of Islam. Yet, it is important to

remember that Islam had a fairly tolerant past at a time when the West *sic* Europe was immersed in forms of deep social discrimination.

There is also the prevalence of a powerful but mistaken belief that Islam and the West were in constant confrontation through the history. As Fred Halliday points "the positing of a continuous, historic, past of confrontation may not only be historically inaccurate but may ascribe cause to religion, an eternal factor, where other more, contingent and contemporary causes, may be at work (Halliday 1999: 898)". True, there were times when they were locked in a long period of battle as was the case during *reconquista*. However, since the opening of the closure of the crusades there has been no major military exchange between the two. Yet the current liberal conservative thinking is disproportionately reactionary. This has contributed to what one might term a climate 'Islamophobia'.

Liberal conservativism's skewed response to Islam has gravely undermined any possibility of sustained dialogue with Islam in general and radical Islam in particular. A viable engagement with radical Islam is feasible when one steps away from this broad narrative of vilifying Islam. Criticism of Islam in this context becomes a challenge to the very identity of the religion and its adherents. Consequently, discrediting Islam indiscriminately with shallow generalisation not only breeds contempt against the secular liberal West but provides ammunition to the radical elements to rise up to the challenge by immersing themselves in self-appointed missions of destruction of their opponents.

Toward Constructive Engagement

There is a prevalent thinking in the West which assumes that radical Islam is a force in opposition to Western "progress" and "civilisation". Far from it. Radical Islam is as much in tune with the forces of modernity as its Western counterpart. In fact it is always in the look out for matching the power of the West.[5] Since it has felt marginalised and powerless in the face of the Western dominance it has assumed a self assured path of radical confrontation through which it can establish its parity with the West or at least undermine its influence and position. In this context, as Francis Fukuyama puts it 'the radical Islamist ideology that has motivated terror attacks in the West and over Western interests elsewhere, during the past one decade must be seen in large measure as a manifestation of modern identity politics rather than of traditional Muslim culture (Fukuyama 2007: 7)'.

Radical Islam is a result of the uncertain times that we as a community are undergoing (Barber 1996; Roy 2004). Challenges of globalisation, problems associated with power politics, uncertainty over future supply of mineral oils and the new identity politics have all contributed to the emergence of a group that prefers to respond to these challenges by its own preferred method of asymmetric confrontation with the West. These very commentators have also pointed out that once the overall uncertainty is settled the threat of radical Islam would die down. Right may be they are in their argument, one cannot sit and wait for these changes to take place at their

[5] Iran's steadfast opposition to the international community on the nuclear issue is a case in point. The politics of nuclear Iran revolves around the issue of "power", "strength" , "modernity",. "equality", and most important of all "virility" associated with such weaponisation.

own pace.[6] For doing so, would not only be catastrophic (in terms of the continuing cost of loss to human lives and property), but also cause irreparable damage in terms of the strained relationship between the West and the larger Islamic world. We should, therefore, find mechanisms to confront it. As Tony Blair put it "it cannot be beaten except by confronting it, symptoms and causes head on (Blair 2005).[7]

That there is no military solution to the problem of radical Islam is becoming ever more apparent. Given its amorphous nature it is impossible to identify the target. At best one could do is engage in a form of shadow boxing against this elusive 'enemy'. Thus any talk of confronting it through our superior military strength is unlikely to yield any dividend. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair put it confronting radical Islam through firepower is a non-starter. In his "speech on terror" following the London train bombings in July 2005 he argued that 'there must be a clear thinking about how the West wins this struggle against radical Islam. The West can take whatever security measures it can. However, "in the end it is by power of argument, debate true religious faith and true legitimate politics that we will defeat this threat (Tony Blair 2005)."

One could argue that however dogmatic and orthodox the radical elements are we simply cannot have a ´slash and burn´ policy towards them. For, in a complex and interdependent world system our current condition (i.e. that of the West) is intimately

[6] To a large extent the activism of radical Islamists has to do with the condition and treatment of fellow Muslims in various conflict zones. If these grievances are addressed effectively there will certainly be a reduction in terms of radical Islamists involvement in extremism. However, given the intrastate nature of such conflicts i.e. Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine and such it is hard to find an international solution to the problem. Equally problematic is the dissociation of national-self interest of various powers such as United States and Britain from various Islamic states. It is not only difficult but impossible to create hermetically sealed societies in an age of globalisation.

[7] In Tony Blair's terms "This is a battle that must be won, a battle not just about the terrorist methods but their views. Not just their barbaric acts, but their barbaric ideas. Not only what they do but what they think and the thinking they would impose on others." http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4689363.stm

linked to the wider world of which the radical Islamists are a vital component. The urgent question, therefore, is how are we to confront it without undermining our interests and at the same time avoiding any long term damage?

There are, of course, no simple ready made solutions to counter the kind of radicalism that we have been witnessing. But as intellectuals and tomorrow's policy makers we have a responsibility – the responsibility to rescue ourselves and the future generation from the mindset that mistakenly believes that the use of brute force, moral superiority and intransigence is the only way in which to counter our opponents in the other camp.

Conclusion

In the end, "Islam may do more to define and shape Europe in the twenty-first century than the United States, Russia or even the European Union (Savage 2004: 25)". Our policies of engaging with radical Islam in a ´tit for tat´, manner has comprehensively failed to produce the original desired aim i.e. limiting the influence of Islamic orthodoxy. Paradoxical as it may appear, our over enthusiasm in pushing a ´liberal agenda´ (in the form of democracy, free speech, and nation building activities in the Islamic world) has in fact produced opposite results. From Afghanistan to Somalia and Lebanon to Iraq, the West's presence has only turned bad situations to worse. In this scenario, we need to rethink our policies in relation to radical Islam

A viable, comprehensive and alternative approach should start with (a) understanding the rational behind radical Islam, (b) limit our over zealous radical conservative liberal agenda while dealing with political Islam and (c) find ways to

constructively engage with this orthodoxy not from prevailing superior and inferior stand point but from the perspective of equality and humility.

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