IDSS COMMENTARIES

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

POLITICAL ISLAM

James Piscatori[1]

March 2002

The events of September 11th have had significant consequences for the Islamic as well as Western worlds. To many, it appears to have marked open warfare between Islam and the West and to have confirmed earlier views of Islamic "rage", particularly invoked since the startling events of the Iranian revolution. Margaret Thatcher, not known for the subtlety of her political analysis, has compared Islamism to Bolshevism – both are totalitarian ideologies that can only be checked by the direct use of force.

But, to my mind, the internal complications may be as great, if not even greater. The shift of operations to the West in general and the United States in particular and the launch of what appears to be global networks of jihad, affecting even the South-eastern Asian region, have been very important, of course. Yet the message to established elites of the Muslim world could not be any clearer as well: your legitimacy is now directly threatened too, your policies are subject to close scrutiny and intense criticism.

Osama bin Ladin, not noted for his theological sophistication, exploited nonetheless the fragmentation of authority that lies behind much of the modern Islamic experience and appointed himself a religious interpreter for the times. If the central political question today is, who speaks for Islam?, Bin Ladin, like others before him and surely others after him, have pointed to themselves. The implication could not be any clearer: why should the traditional religious authorities, the 'ulama, or entrenched political elites, like the Saudi monarchy, be followed?

The particular message of Bin Ladin, moreover, is not especially new, but it has a powerful resonance. Although Bin Ladin demonstrated a public relations genius that caught many by surprise, his arguments were merely an update of the Islamic Jihad group in Egypt and a borrowing from the Islamic Liberation Party. The former is more substantial and was made known to him through the tutorial supervision of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the amir of the Jihad group and deputy leader of al-Qa'ida.

The thrust of the worldview can be interpreted as subversive: does not the Qur'an say that polytheists should be fought until they cease to exist, and that those who do not rule according to God's law are unbelievers and, by implication, should be resisted (5:44)? The radicals use the first Qur'anic reference to delegitimise non-believers standing outside of Islam, while they apply the second inwardly as an attack on the rulers of the Muslim world who are corrupt and dependent on infidel power. Although both arguments rely on interpretations of scripture that other Muslims contest, they derive much of their force

---

[1] Professor James Piscatori is Fellow of Wadham College and of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, and member of the Faculties of Social Studies and Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. He presented this paper at a Round Table on *September 11 and its Implications for World Politics* chaired by Mr. Barry Desker, Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Nanyang Technological University, on 28 February 2002. The Round Table was part of a module organised by IDSS for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Foreign Service Advanced Programme.*

from the direct appeal to "tradition". This appears to validate a timeless moral framework that collapses the boundaries between the external and internal and relies on built-in notions of justice and injustice.

Islamist radicals unsurprisingly single out the United States as the latest and most aggressive from of imperialism. Bin Ladin's statement of 7 October 2001 dated the current troubles of the Muslim world to 80 years before. The reference is not precisely clear, but it is likely that it refers to the demise of the caliphate in 1924. This interpretation is consistent with a general Islamist account that links European, especially British, intervention with local secularising regimes –here Atatürk – to explain the collapse of Muslim unity.

The American presence is particularly harmful because it is both economic and ideological: its attempt to attain market domination is dependent on the curtailing of Islam to a kind of safe, conservative and largely privatised Islam such as practised by the ruling elites of the Muslim world. Moreover, the United Nations, which belongs in the category of the "hypocrites" (munafiqun) – a term often used in Islamist discourse to delegitmise opponents – is also culpable because it assists America in its designs on the Islamic world. The true believer could not expect this body to be impartial given its role in the partition and continuing occupation of Palestine, and Muslim governments that continue to maintain a UN seat have made themselves infidels.

As this suggests, the view of world politics that is thus presented is at once heroic and confrontational. Christians and Jews are categories of international political analysis and "Crusaders" exist today as they did in the medieval period. But so too do heroic mujahidin who, in the later 20th century in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir among other places, defied the godless powers of the age. In addition, a medieval juridical bifurcation of the world has reasserted itself. The world was thought to be divided between the Islamic realm (dar al-Islam) and non-Islamic realm of war (dar al-harb). This gained renewed currency in a world divided between us and them – but with a significant added twist: purportedly Muslim states now fall into the non-Islamic category. States like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan may proclaim themselves to be Islamic, but they are actually "allies of Satan". Some groups such as the Muhajirun in Britain, an offshoot of the Islamic Liberation Party, go so far as to say that because no regimes can be considered Islamic today, there is no such things as dar al-Islam, only the realm of war.

This is not a very nuanced worldview, and the targets could not be clearer that they are indeed targeted. Others here will speak of the United States and other Western governments, but the point I want to emphasise is that local regimes in the Muslim world understand that they are targeted too. There are two implications that flow from this.

First, the local regimes – as well as their external supporters – have to face their willingness to reform their own societies. Corruption and a democracy deficit are clearly a problem for their long-term survival – and, of course, a short-term challenge. If they do open their systems, they run the risk of destabilising their rule in the immediate future. But, equally obviously, if they do nothing, the long term can only be grim. Suppression or reform is the urgent debate for the twenty-first century, therefore. Egypt is promoting its model of outright repression of Islamist groups as the most effective way to deal with regime challenges. But it is not clear that popular sentiments can be so easily controlled. We have heard, indeed, a lot about the "street" in the Muslim world. Some believe that its

influence has been inconsequential, pointing for example to the diminishing protests against the war in Afghanistan. But, on the other hand, groups and individuals across the Muslim world have expressed – overtly and discreetly – their sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. I subscribe to the view that a potent way to deal with terrorism is to provide for systemic and regular political openings, that is, defusion through diffusion.

Secondly, there are likely to be foreign policy implications. We have already seen a deterioration in relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and an improvement of relations between the US and Pakistan. In addition, we also see the Saudi initiative on Middle East peace. It is not the first time that Muslim rulers have used foreign policy initiatives to stave off internal criticisms. The difference now, though, is that the stakes are higher. Changes in foreign policy may well follow from regime insecurity.

In general, then, we need to put the post-September events into perspective. They do not portend an inevitable clash between Islam and the West. Neither Islam nor the West is a monolith, and there are overlapping norms and values between Muslim states and Western ones. The emergence of a stable petroleum system and the tenuous emergence of a peace system in the Middle East may be indicative of this. The stability of pro-Western regimes like Saudi Arabia is more directly in question, however, and it is clear that the firepower of radical Islamists is directed in part against the West and Israel, but also at home governments that are deemed to be impious and corrupt. The challenges are internal as well as external and, in this sense, potentially destabilising.