

A year after 9/11

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The terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, were the beginning of a nightmare for Muslim civil societies and states across the globe. Immediately, the Western media, following from the Bush declaration of the "crusade", defined the War on terrorism as a *them vs us* conflict. And the "them" were the Muslims and Islam of course - as the quotes below show:

* "There is only one way to begin deal with people like this, and that is have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this things"

— former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger (CNN 9/11/01)

* "This is no time to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack... We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren't punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war."

— Syndicated columnist Ann Coulter (National Review Online, 9/13/01)

Suddenly the Huntington contention of a "clash of civilisations" seemed to be coming true - despite the absurdity of the logic. The War on Terrorism and the Western media's response to the attack, as well as the war itself, helped to bolster the stereotype of Muslims in the West, which in turn led to deliberate distortions and suppression of facts in the media coverage of the fallout of 9/11. This was done at three levels:

First, both the electronic and print media projected Islam as a violent religion, and Muslims as by and large extremists who indulged in violence against anyone opposed to their objectives - and that there was an inherent conflict between Islam and the West - this last point was most clearly enunciated by the Italian Prime Minister in his diatribe against Islam:

* Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi said:

"We must be aware of the superiority of our civilisation, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights and - in contrast with Islamic countries - respect for religious and political rights, a system that has its values in understanding of diversity and tolerance." ... The West, he added, "will continue to conquer peoples, like it conquered communism," even if that means confronting "another civilisation, the Islamic one, stuck where it was 1,400 years ago."

Second, that the objective of all Muslim groups involved in militant struggles was to proselytize Islam and convert people to Islam violently - and therefore all these groups, no matter what their cause, needed to be dealt with equally violently. This was the logic that Israel and India have used since 9/11 against the Palestinians and the Kashmiris. So basically an open season against Muslims has been declared post-9/11. A BBC programme shown before the end of 2001, Panorama, entitled "Clash of Culture", depicted this very vividly, not only in the manner of the competing but also in the choice of guests seated in the US, which included old Muslim-haters like Ed Koch.

Third, a deliberate suppression of the violence being perpetrated against Muslims in the West, post-9/11.

Howard Zinn wrote in *The Nation* of February 11, 2002:

* "These reports (US-led coalition operations in Afghanistan and the ensuing civilian casualties) have been mostly out of sight of the general public (Indeed, virtually never reported on national television, where most Americans get their news), and so dispersed as to reinforce the idea that the bombing of civilians has been an infrequent event, a freak accident, an unfortunate mistake."

(If course, now the suppressed information is coming out as reflected in the August 26, 2002 edition of *Newsweek*, with its special report on 'The War Crimes of Afghanistan'. There have also been reports of American soldiers themselves being involved in the torture and murder of the captured Taliban prisoners, and in the "disappearance" of up to 3000 men in the region of Mazar-i-Sharif - as shown in a documentary 'Massacre at Mazar' which was shown to the German Parliament on August 28, 2002. And there have been numerous acts of violence against individual Muslims in the US which have hardly been reported in the Western media. All in all, the Western media made Islam the convenient scapegoat despite the fact that, as Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the Muslim Parliament in Britain, stated, "Out of over 6000 people who died in this terrible incident, over 1,500 of them were Muslims. The Muslim community has had to suffer twice - once when someone dear to them died, the second time when people say things like this."

So what then are some of the trends that are emerging in relation to the media post-9/11?

One, that the governments in the West use the media to rationalise their policies - the latest case being the intended US military attack on Iraq. Already stories in the media are emerging trying to establish a link between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda.

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For example, US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld declared: "There are al-Qaeda in a number of locations in Iraq", and "it's very hard to imagine the government is not aware of what's taking place in the country." (*Time Magazine*, 2 September, 2002)

With a public ready to accept the worst about Muslims, such stories find easy acceptance so a groundswell of public opinion is readied for aggressive action.

Two, that increasingly, a subjective morality is being injected into the US-led War on Terrorism which is becoming a US unilateralist agenda in the manner in which it is unfurling - the declaration of an "Axis of Evil" being one reflection of this.

Three, that for the future it does not matter how liberal a Muslim state is, it will be defined in terms of its religion (eg Turkey viz EU membership), and that Muslims in the West will come under increasing restrictions and scrutiny as well as professional biases. Also, slogans such as globalisation vs Islam and clash of civilisations will be ever more common.

Muslim states will have to show the absurdity of these slogans, because the slogans have been around for a while now and 9/11 has given them a new impetus - reflecting a subjective assumption and a prejudice that has pervaded the Western world since the success of the Iranian Revolution. The mentality of the crusades resurfaced as the image of a revival of populist Islam made it to the homes of Western civil society through the media. The demise of the Soviet Union allowed the West to fill the political ideological vacuum left by this event with the spectre of Islamic internationalism. And so, "Islamic fundamentalism" came to dominate the "them vs us" syndrome that has pervaded the Western strategic psyche since the experience of the Cold War and bipolarity. Huntington's emotive "clash of civilisations" thesis added the intellectual force for this mindset and 9/11 has provided the final "proof" of this thesis! But the lines were drawn much earlier on. As Sandra Mackey wrote in 1996: The very term 'Islamic fundamentalism' was given common coinage at the zenith of the Iranian revolution. Since then it has grabbed and held an American public emotionally scarred by military casualties and civilian hostages in Lebanon; violence inflicted against Westerners by Islamic militants in Algeria and Egypt; fear engendered by the shadowy group that detonated a bomb in New York's World Trade Center; and anger roused by the endless slogans of Islamic zealots than damn the West. Regardless of the range of grievances and geography of militant Islamic groups, the American mind sees the Islamic Republic of Iran as the font of Islamic extremism."

With this focus on 'Islamic fundamentalism', the rise of non-Islamic fundamentalists was, and continues to be, forgotten or deliberately ignored by the West - beginning with Zionism (which by definition is 'fundamentalist') and Hindu fundamentalism and going on to the rise of political right wing fundamentalism in Europe and the US (where the present Attorney General is a fundamentalist Christian). Be that as it may, the Huntington notion of a clash of civilisations found ready acceptance in the Western mindset. Yet there is a very basic flaw in this thesis in that it creates artificial monoliths of an Islamic civilisation, a Western civilisation and so on.

Of course, there is a background to the development of the West's antagonism towards Islam. There are those "Muslims" who would abuse Islam for their own ends. Islam continues to be maligned not only by the decadent "Islamic" non-representative regimes, but also by the intolerant obscurantists who deny the very creed of tolerance and brotherhood that is the humanist essence of Islam. In fact both these distortions of Islam aid and abet Western designs and allow the Western psyche to feed its Crusade trauma.

As for the notion of globalisation coming into conflict with the religion of Islam - that too is a contradiction in terms since Islam itself has a strong global dimension. For a start, to be a Muslim you have to accept the basics of the Old Testament - thereby creating a link and acceptance of Christians and Jews that is unique to Islam. There is a universalism that is integral to Islam, especially in its unstructured non-hierarchical nature - after all, there is no clergy in Islam and no formalised church structure.

It is with the US moving towards increasingly unilateralist interventionism in the world that international norms and treaties, created over the decades, stand threatened. In many ways, the post-9/11 trend towards political globalisation within the US unilateralist mode will threaten economic and cultural globalisation - since it will push a global agenda through national power rather than international cooperation. The challenge to this will come from other political forces, not the religious force of Islam. The clash between civilisations or globalisation trends is of a politico-cultural nature - between the forces of politico-economic hegemony through uniformity on the one hand, and the challenge from the forces of diversity and the have-nots on the other.