

How Orientalism harmed Muslims

By Muhammad Abbas

ALL policies, both internal and external, of a given country, are necessarily based on some rationale, considerations, objectives and ground realities. All these elements stem from knowledge, information and data gathered through informal and formal mechanisms.

Information thus obtained is analysed and synthesized before any policy or strategy is chalked out to deal with a problem or a situation and to achieve certain objectives. In this exercise options are also decided and room is provided for lines of action in case of new factors emerging during the implementation of policies. The western policy-makers while dealing with Muslim world kept an eye on these guidelines. The most significant input in deciding upon policies regarding Muslim world came from Orientalism — a discipline created by the West. It has a long history beginning from the end of Crusades, which rather compelled the West to initiate the study of Islam, the Holy Quran, Arabic language, Islamic history and culture.

To begin with, there were casual efforts to study Islam and limited mechanisms somewhat disjointed were evolved to find out what Islam was all about. It started with collection of material on and about Islam, translation of the Quran and Islamic classics in various European languages and teaching of Arabic in specialized institutes. First it was Italy, because of its proximity to Muslim world, where Islamic studies started. France, Britain, Holland and Germany followed.

It would be worthwhile to briefly trace the history of Orientalism. But, before that, a few words about what connotes Orientalism. 'Orient' means that part of the world in which Muslim world is located plus India, Bangladesh, China, Japan and countries of the Far East. The term Orientalist means a person, who knows some language of some oriental country or knows something about history, arts, languages, and culture of oriental countries.

The term Orientalist was first used in 1780 for a student of eastern regions of the world but Orientalism

came in vogue only after 1870. It was Napoleon who established an Institute of Egyptian & Arabic studies in Paris. This was a landmark in the history of Orientalism as it provided a basis for French policy towards Egypt and other adjoining Muslim areas. However, before that Britain had established some institutions like Royal Asiatic Society, to get input from them for policy formations while dealing with its colonies.

The basic assumption for such policies has been well explained by late Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism*. In the eyes of the West, according to him, "The Oriental (man in the East) was one who did not know what was the best for him, was incapable of ruling himself, is gullible, abhors accuracy and so slips into untruthfulness, cannot think logically or give a clear statement of facts and easily falls into intrigue".

The other assumption, according to Edward W. Said, is that "The West is rational, developed, human, superior and the Orient is aberrant, undeveloped and inferior". Thus Orientalism was and is the byproduct of western colonial hold on the East. A large number of Orientalists served European empires before and during the colonial era. It had missionary overtone as well and the target of missionaries, armed with information provided by Orientalism, was Islam and the Muslim world. Most of the Orientalists were and are either Jews or Christians.

Orientalism developed in four stages. The first stage spread over eight hundred years from 7th to 15th century. During this period a large number of European students used to study in the universities of Muslim Spain. This led to Renaissance in Europe. Two Arabic schools were established in Italy and a large number of Arabic books on various disciplines were translated.

During this period Crusades had already led to a direct contact between Muslims and Christians. The Muslims were a superior power of the world at the time and conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. The Ottoman rule extended to European countries right up to the present-day Croatia. This contact also

stimulated Arabic and Islamic studies in western Europe.

With the decline of the Muslim rule, the West gained ascendancy and established its colonial rule over almost the entire Muslim world. A new era of Oriental studies started to back up colonial rule and policies. A whole generation of oriental scholars got engaged in studies and a large number of institutions were established in France, Germany, Britain and Holland to conduct research on oriental lands and people. The studies and research were used as inputs for the formation of European policies towards the Muslim peoples such divide and rule strategies. Turks and Arabs were, as a result, pitted against each other.

Chairs of Arabic, Islamic Oriental studies were established at various universities of western countries. The University of Leiden in Holland became the most important centre of learning about Islam and Muslim world languages and culture. In the 19th century, several Arabic works specially of Islamic history were translated into different European languages and flourished along with translations of Holy Quran. After the Ottoman caliphate ended, one finds the works of Orientalists like Montgomery Watta, Thomas Arberry, Gibs and the like who had laid the foundation of latest research on Islam.

During the colonial rule, a group of Orientalists which consisted of Christians also served the objectives of the colonial rulers and administrators. Western Orientalists were a part of bureaucracy and essentially worked against Islam. Right from 7th century to 20th century their research and study of Islam has never been objective and balanced. They assumed that Islam is static and spread many falsehoods about it such as it was spread by sword and that it encouraged sexual indulgence.

One such group tried to prove that Islamic culture is the sum total of pre-Islamic cultures. They projected the view that Islamic society is based on the culture of the era of ignorance, that Islamic philosophy is derived for Greek thought, Islamic laws are derived from Roman laws and ethics and that this religion has been

derived for Christianity and Judaism. All this was done to create an impression that there was and is nothing original in Islam.

William Muir has said that after the defeat of Christianity in Crusades, the Christian world realised that Islam was the hurdle in its way and unless Islam was made unacceptable, Christianity could not flourish.

They tried to stress that Islam may have had a glorious past but cannot survive without the help of the western nations. Another group has been engaged in presenting Islam in a way that arouses hatred against Muslims. There are two most significant results of all the work done by Orientalists. First, Islam and Muslims are the target of intellectual and cultural attack of the West and, second, the Muslim world is politically under the influence of the western concepts of democracy, secularism and so-called liberal ideas.

The West is determined to politically dominate Muslims, conquer every area inhabited by Muslims where oil resources abound and also to change the culture of Islamic counties and impose its own culture.

Today, a new class of Orientalists is forcefully pointing to a 'serious danger' of 'Islamic fundamentalism' — a new charge against Islam. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc the cold war, during which the West was obsessed and haunted by Communism, has ended. Now the West is haunted by Islam. The present generation of Orientalists is giving red signals to the West against threats from Islam and the Muslims.

There is a spate of seminars and conferences aimed at studying Islamic movements, their methods and aims in the current context. They have created a fear, almost paranoia in the West about revivalist movements in the Muslim World. The "danger" is blown out of proportion and the threat to their civilization from Islam is over-blown by both Orientalists and the media. The fact of the matter is that Muslim world in its present shape is simply incapable of posing any threat or danger to the West. ■

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