

Islam, the West, and Ethnonationalism: A Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Central and South Asia

Iftikhar Malik

Western analysis, due to its dangerous oversimplification of Islam and other matters in the Muslim world, has traditionally seen the appearance of any indigenous movement calling for change and improvement in the name of Islam as a major threat. Muslims continue to be viewed in the stereotypical perspective of the “us-against-them” syndrome, a practice which prevents a proper comprehension of the dynamics and dilemmas faced by Muslims in the postcolonial era. The Western media and, to some extent, academia thrive on such themes as minority rights, nuclear proliferation, human rights, and democracy, which they use as barometers. Based on the data which they collect, they then pass sweeping decrees about Muslim countries. Internal diversity and conflict receive a great deal of attention, whereas human achievements and civilizational artifacts are considered as “foreign” to the Muslim ethos. Islam as a religion is reduced to so-called “fundamentalism” and a mere puritanical and/or coercive theological orthodoxy. Moreover, no distinction is made between Islam as a religion and Muslim cultures and societies, nor between Muslim aspirations for unity and the realities of national and ethnic differentiation. The result is a Western view which both distorts and demonizes a large part of the Muslim world.

As if this were not enough, Muslims in the post-Cold War era are now being presented and “imagined” as the next enemy. Among the factors responsible for this are a) the multiple nature of the Muslim world, given its geostrategic location right next to Europe; b) Islam as the second major religion in the West; and c) the assertion of a new generation of Muslim expatriate communities at a time

of a growing anti-immigration political idiom, seen in the historic perspective of imbalanced relations between the Muslim and Christian worlds.

In what follows, I will begin my analysis with a discourse on distinction, an essential preface to any analytical attempt to study the Muslim world.

The Current Situation

During the last three years, significant upheavals have resulted from an upsurge of ethnonationalism and demands for the establishment of participatory systems and the dismantling of the coercive forces and institutions of the state. We have also seen global changes unleashed by calls for greater regional integration, most notably among the nations of the European Community (EC). Such ethnonationalist or subnational forces receive their inspiration, in varying degrees, from historical, cultural, linguistic, religious, and territorial commonalities. The distribution of a single ethnic community across international borders, especially in the developing world, has at times caused serious political and diasporic questions in terms of its own identification and over the validity of postcolonial international boundaries.

As a result, the ethnic question, when complemented by religious solidarity as in Central and South Asia, has acquired extranational dimensions. Both concepts of “state” and “nationalism” have come under great strains not only in the developing world but also in certain developed countries, such as Canada. Pierre Trudeau, former prime minister of Canada, was aware of this. While writing about the balkanization threat posed by the Quebec question, he quoted extensively from Lord Acton on the mutual relationship between the state and nationalism. Lord Acton had said: “A great democracy must either sacrifice self-government to unity or preserve it by federalism. The coexistence of several nations under the same State is a test, as well as the best security of its freedom. It is also one of the chief instruments of civilization.” Trudeau, agreeing on a broad principle of federalism (as opposed to state-led centralism) not only for Canada but for many other such multiethnic countries, noted:

So a truly democratic government – whether provincial or federal – cannot be nationalist because it must pursue the good of all its citizens, regardless of sex, colour, race, religious belief and ethnic origin. Democratic government stands for good citizenship, never nationalism. This is not to say that the state must disregard cultural or linguistic values: they must have high priority. And while government policies all inevitably serve the interests of ethnic groups, especially of the majority, this would be a natural consequence of

the equality of all citizens, not a special privilege of the largest groups.¹

Trudeau, perturbed by dramatic developments in the post-Meech Lake Accord, felt that in a plural society like Canada, which has its fair share of interethnic tensions, the best course to follow would be to construct a loose federal system rather than one dedicated to pursuing the majority's interests in the name of majoritarian nationalism. Similar editorial views on the erosion of state-based structures have frequently been expressed in the English-language periodical press while expanding on the emergence of a very interdependent Europe.²

Such a crucial debate is now taking place in many parts of the world (i.e., the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, and South Asia), all of which are searching for a synthesis among the tripolar forces of nationalism, ethnonationalism, and the state. At the same time, there is also a strong urge for regional cooperation, as in the case of the EC striding towards "Europe 1992," a trend which many non-EC countries find worrisome, despite the defeat in September 1991 of the ambitious Dutch formula for an overarching integrated Europe. In the same vein, American strategists like Brzezinski have hinted towards "Amerippon," a entity characterized by closer economic cooperation in Asia between the United States and Japan extending all the way to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Such parallel developments denoting both regional integration and internal reorganization (even at the expense of territorial redefinition) are occurring with a strong bias towards the political Right and are inspired by the forces of religion, ethnic-based nationalism, privatization, and a market-based economy. In Europe, it is occasionally imbued with strong racist connotations, as seen in the recent episodes of the desecration of mosques and Jewish cemeteries, attacks on immigrant workers and, worst of all, a reemergence of the Crusade-based "bogey" of the Islamic threat. This last element was especially evident in the European media in the aftermath of election results in Jordan (1990) and Algeria (1991) and also during the Gulf crisis.³ Even the Afghan Mujahideen, former favorites of the West, are now occasionally branded as terrorists and fundamentalists.⁴ In the same vein, struggles for self-determination among the Muslims of Central Asia have been viewed in certain alarmist quarters as Islamic fundamentalism or nomadic tribalism.⁵ Movements in Palestine and Kashmir have at times been

¹*The Times* (London), 23 June 1990.

²*The Economist* (London), 3 June 1990.

³In countries like France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, immigration has become a major political issue. In France, the ultraright politician Mr. Le Pen has been joined in his denunciation of immigrants by leading French politicians, such as Valerie Giscard d'Estaing. Also see Ruth Marshall, "Last Land Before the Sea," *Newsweek* 7, October 1991, p. 28.

⁴It is noticed even by non-Muslim authors. For instance, see Deepak Tripathi, "Afghanistan: The Last Episode?" *The World Today* 48, no. 1: 10-2.

⁵The media is positing a "cold war" within these countries between the "moderates" and the "fundamentalists." Extraregional states (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Egypt) are shown to be "nervous"

juxtaposed with terror or religious militancy, an attempted linkage which in fact ignores the objective realities on the ground.

Western Distortions of Islam

As we saw in the 1980s, the vitality of the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation emanated from the mutually supportive forces of religious and ethnocultural traditions.⁶ Similarly, the former Muslim republics of Soviet Central Asia did not “discover” religion all of a sudden after *perestroika*; it was always there, though perceived as a clandestine force by the centrist regimes in Moscow.⁷ Ironically, the juxtaposition of “Islamic” and “Muslim” continues, and the latter still evokes a Crusades-based distortion of Muslims in the non-Muslim world⁸ – Islam’s role as a historic bridge between the civilizations of the East and the West is simply ignored.

Islam, while essentially a depolarizing force, continues to be perceived in a negative fashion: “It is only during the last 20 years that both the Western and communist worlds have come to see in fanatic Islam a threat more serious than each other. Most of us now instinctively feel that when we are faced with, for instance, the ayatollahs, Russia is on our side.”⁹ Another similar article, appearing in the same magazine under the title “Muslims, Be Men Not Mice,” manifested a typical Western ambiguity towards the Muslim world.¹⁰ Such visual and printed images are displayed quite prominently by the media on the anniversaries of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death. The pictures of book-burning or mourning Muslims dramatize the projection of millions of Muslims without creating a better understanding or an appreciation of their dilemmas. When reporting on the Algerian elections or events in Muslim Central Asia, Caucasia, or the Balkans, sensationalized headlines concerning Muslim fundamentalists appear with great

about the rising tide of Islamists. Islam, which earlier challenged the Soviet totalitarian state, is now perceived by the Western media as a threat within the Muslim states. See *The Guardian*, 2 January 1992 and *The Financial Times*, 23 January 1992.

⁶For a pertinent study on the subject, see Oliver Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷For an informed discussion on this subject, see Edward Mortimer, “Christianity and Islam,” *International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (January 1991): 7-13.

⁸This subject has been thoroughly discussed by several well-known scholars in the West. For example, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978) and Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, tr. Roger Veinus (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., 1988).

⁹*The Spectator* (London), 3 February 1990, p. 13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 10 February 1990. See also *The Daily Telegraph* (London), 11 February 1990. *Newsweek*, 7 May 1990, carried on its cover a picture of veiled Turkish women (after well-rehearsed Iranian subjects), thereby implying a stereotypical image of Muslims.

frequency, although one may come across solitary voices urging sanity and sobriety when it comes to trying to understand the Muslim world. An example of this latter trend is provided by Hamilton:

Much of this is just racist rubbish, a grotesque dismissal of a religion and a complex of cultures, simply because they are different and not easily understood . . . as if patriotism was reasonable among whites and mad among the Muslims, and as if war was the product of some religious infection. Some of this bogeyman rhetoric is also just another 'rent-a-threat' argument for continued high defence spending. Even if the Soviet Union is no longer a threat, as Mrs Thatcher argued with characteristic insouciance at the Nato meeting last month, the West will still need new flexible forces to deal with the Middle East . . . If Mrs Thatcher and her fellow leaders in Nato really worry about the explosive dangers in the Middle East – as they have every reason to do – then the answer lies not in gunboats and flexible strike forces, but in salving the Palestinian sore on the body politic of the area. The really depressing news of the last week was not in Algiers but in Tel Aviv.¹¹

Similar suggestions of becoming first good Britons/Europeans and then anything else are regularly relayed to the Muslim community in England by politicians (i.e., Norman Tebbit) and various journalists.¹² Quite ironically, it is forgotten that those unnatural postcolonial international borders which divide ethnic groups are a constant source of international tension within the communities thus affected. This division has led to an increased consciousness and awareness of one's due rights and a growing sense of alienation resulting from forced colonization by outsiders as well as from the multiple economic disparities joined to repressive political systems, or racial discrimination, all of which have increased the problems and difficulties Muslim communities face across the globe. As a result of these factors, the Muslim world, particularly in the South, is engaged in a crucial debate on how best to work out its own identity.

¹¹Adrian Hamilton, "Time to Bury the Bogey of Islam," *The Observer* (London), 17 June 1990 and "Islam's Tide Is Just a Ripple," *The Economist*, 23 June 1990. The electoral results in Algeria have also been viewed in terms of the reemergence of feudalism, as in P. Huston, "Algeria: From Independence back to Feudalism," *International Herald Tribune*, 15 June 1990. After the British foreign secretary's visit to India and Moscow in mid-January 1992, it was insinuated that Islamic fundamentalism represents the new major threat for India, the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union), and the Balkans. In addition to being alarmist, such a view ignores the Muslims' minority status vis-à-vis the predominantly non-Muslim majoritarian pseudocolonial states. In India, for example, it is a resurgent Hindu fundamentalism in the form of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and not the beleaguered Muslims, which is causing severe riots and ethnic tension. See *The Independent*, 23 January 1992.

¹²Clifford Longley, *The Times*, 23 June 1990.

Identity Formation in the Muslim World

Muslim identity has always been based on Islam. Islam has therefore served as a rallying point in the postcolonial Muslim world. As we see today, the ongoing debate among Muslims is not mainly on being Muslim or otherwise; rather it is on seeking a synthesis within a number of young political (national and ethnic) and old sociocultural (religious) identities. Islam accommodates ethnic pluralism, although it visualizes a unified universal Muslim community (ummah) based on diversity, while a state, on the other hand, is led by bureaucratic elites which advocate the imposition of integration and uniformity, occasionally at the expense of ethnic pluralism. Thus, those trying to impose an overarching nationalism and administrative machinery have to expend a great deal of effort trying to get the "ethnics" to create an "imagined" unity in the name of national integration. In Central and South Asia, this problem is faced on a daily basis, for Islam and ethnic separatism work against the wishes of Moscow and New Delhi, both of which have pursued similar coercive policies and prefer to see any expression of ethnic nationalism as fundamentalism or communalism and ethnic pluralism as mere tribalism.

The Muslims of India present a serious dilemma to the Indian leadership which, despite its suprarreligious rhetoric, represents the non-Muslim majority.¹³ From politics to economics and from the arts to education, the Indian Muslims today make up the huge mass of the depressed underclass, in many cases far behind the Dalits (the former "Untouchables" of the Hindu caste system). As seen in the case of L. K. Advani's Rath Yatra (1991) and Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra (January 1992), both of which call for the solidarity of Hindu nationalism under the auspices of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), what results is a backlash against the Indian Muslims while, ironically, they are at the same time expected to demonstrate an extranationalistic patriotism, despite their problematic situation, and to do so at the expense of their religious and historical identities.

Indian Muslims, unlike their trans-Hindu Kush and Kashmiri counterparts and like their coreligionists in Myanmar (formerly Burma), are not asking for autonomy; they want equal rights within the Indian federation.¹⁴ Kashmir is a

¹³For a refreshing study on this subject, see Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁴With the reemergence of Hindu fundamentalism as espoused by parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which voices such slogans as "Pakistan Ya Qabristan" (lit. Pakistan or Graveyard), and the long-held fears that what happened to the Muslims of Andalusia might happen to them, the Muslims of India have become increasingly fearful of what the future holds for them. Even the post-1947 British secret documents pointed towards increasing anti-Muslim sentiments in India. For recently declassified British documents dealing with this subject, see Do/35 No. 3005, *Indian Muslims*, Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London.

special case, as it has never been a legitimate part of the Indian union and because it has both indigenous and international dimensions. In Sri Lanka, local Muslims are used as scapegoats by the government and the Tamil rebels, both of whom put them right within the crossfire. Such turmoil, itself affecting the largest concentration of Muslims in the world (from the Aegean Sea to the Bay of Bengal), demands a dispassionate study of the forces of religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and the state.

One finds a multitiered identity formation in the contemporary Muslim world. For instance, Central Asia's Azeris, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Turkomans, Uzbeks, or Kirghiz regard being Muslim (inclusive of religion, history, and culture) as a politicoideological identity and being Turkic/non-Russian as another level of identification (reinforcing the first level of a countrywide identification), whereas among the Turkic/Iranian communities, strictly ethnic differentiation (Azeris, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, etc.) provides the third level of identity. Similarly, the Caucasians (i.e., the Chechens, Inguish, Daghestanis, and Tartars), despite their "Europeanness" and physical affinity with the Russians, have always defined their separatism on the basis of religion and culture. They fought against the Russians for centuries to maintain their separatism, and their ethnic solidarity has not only survived but has been strengthened during their diaspora. Seeing such a multiple conglomerate of parallel though not essentially mutually exclusive identities, an outside observer might, for the sake of convenience, be tempted to simplify the scenario in terms of Islamic fundamentalism or pan-Turanism. Yet it would be simplistic to view such movements in contemporary Central Asia and Caucasia or elsewhere as mere theological upsurges, despite the fact that religious identification remains the major motivation.

Efforts to dismantle archaic and oppressive state-dominated edifices through the ballot box and a multiparty political system, no matter how fragile or dramatic they appear, are an integral part of humanity's current quest for a just order based on the essentials of a civil society. The Muslim world must be viewed in the same larger global perspective and not as a special "disruptive" region with some sinister designs against the rest. The dilemma of the Muslim world has to be seen in terms of long-standing inertia, its sense of loss due to colonialism, and to the ongoing nonrepresentative political systems and economic disparities which have dominated the region until now. The unnatural borders crisscrossing ethnic and natural units have left several unresolved disputes, a fact that underscores the need for immediate redress.

At this point in time, nationalism imposed by the state's powerful and coercive institutions can no longer create a shared consciousness among disparate ethnic communities living within borders imposed upon them by their former colonial masters and without their consent. The only guarantee for the longevity of a viable state lies in its potential as a nation, which implies more than being a mere geographic entity. In many parts of the developing world, the process of becoming

a country has been far easier than that of becoming a nation. Growing ethnic consciousness in both the North and the South, particularly after the Second World War, demands the restructuring of existing socioeconomic and politicocultural institutions on the basis of pluralism.

While complete integration will remain an ideal for many years, some progress towards realizing it can be made by establishing more participatory institutions based on mutual accommodation. The forces of unilateralism and state-led repression have, unfortunately, exacerbated ethnic dissensions on a global scale. The fragmentation and subsequent redefinition of such states, at a time when more emphasis is being placed on regional cooperation based on shared ethnocultural traditions, a common political ethos, and shared economic objectives, may be the hallmark of the 1990s. Such a prospect is full of challenges and prospects for the Muslim world.

Muslim Central Asia

Since the advent of Islam in Central Asia, the region's inhabitants have witnessed a very interesting cycle: they went from landlocked, isolated, tribalized communities with localized economies to empire-builders whose reach extended from the Balkans to China, including Iran, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and North Africa. The Turks emerged as the torch-bearers of Islamic political, cultural, and intellectual glory and thus witnessed their historic "internationalization." Earlier migrations from this region (i.e., the Aryans) into neighboring Asiatic and European lands had left their imprints, but over time these became diluted due to assimilation. Islam not only gave a new identity to the disparate isolated communities; it put them in the vanguard of Islamic civilization and thereby broke the constant geographical isolation brought on by migrations, demographic factors, internecine warfare, or their great conquests as only "spurs" of Central Asian history.

Muslim Turks, along with the ruling hierarchies in Persia and Ottoman Turkey, provided a long chain of ruling dynasties in areas of the Indian subcontinent (hereinafter referred to as Muslim India) – from the Ghaznavids (977 onwards) to Bahadur Shah Zafar, the Mughal emperor deposed by the British in 1858. In between were brief interludes of non-Turkic suzerainty over Muslim India (i.e., the Sayyids, the Lodhis, or the Suris). However, these operated not as an antithesis but rather as a synthesis. From language (i.e., Urdu) to the tax revenue system, the intellectual ethos to imperial armies, architecture to painting, dress styles to ceremonial customs and cuisine, the Central Asian influence on Muslim India was massive. All through this period, enduring and multidimensional bilateral relations between the two regions were established due to population migrations, similar political traditions, and common spiritual

and intellectual experiences. South Asia gradually emerged as the political and cultural focal point of both regions. Mahmud of Ghazna, the pioneering Turkish conqueror of the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, did not make the Indian subcontinent his permanent home, although he frequented it often.

Muslim Central Asia's political dominance over Muslim India followed the intellectual and spiritual dialogue that predated it. A number of Muslim mystics, artists, or scholars (i.e., al Biruni, Amir Khusro, Nizam-ud-din Awliya, Ali Hajveri, or Mu'in-ud-din Chishti) were the forerunners of an unprecedented relationship that was to emerge between the two regions with the establishment of regular Muslim imperial power in the northern portion of the Indian subcontinent. By the time of the early Delhi sultans, the Turkish nobility in Muslim India had developed indigenous roots, although invaders like Amir Taymur would opt for going back to Central Asia.

Muslim India witnessed the flourishing of Islam's intellectual and cultural traditions. Delhi, Agra, and Lahore were not only the centers of Muslim political power; they were the equivalents of Central Asia's Samarqand, Tashkent, and Bukhara. Babur, the famous Turkish classicist and second only to Ali Shir Nawai, reveled in the Indian subcontinent's prosperity and natural bounties despite his criticism of the land and its peoples in his *Tuzk-i-Baburi* and his desire to be buried in his native Farghana. Under Mughal rule, Muslim India superseded its other Turkish and Iranian counterparts both in empire building and in sociointellectual achievements. The adaptation of Turkish influence and its synthesis with Persian, Arab, and other cultural traditions of the Indian subcontinent gave the area a leading role in the Muslim world. Persian emerged as the *lingua franca*, and scholars, craftsmen, courtiers, and engineers from Persia and Muslim Central Asia flocked to the Mughal courts. Even though Shah Jahan lost his ancestral lands of Farghana and Uzbekistan to local contenders, the cultural, intellectual, and economic interaction between both regions continued. While very few South Asians decided to settle in Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent received waves of immigrants. It was only with the Durrani conquest of Afghanistan (early 1700s), which was simultaneous with the decline of Mughal political power in Delhi, that the two regions began to lose contact with each other. Afghanistan was forced into the role of a reluctant buffer state between British India and a fragmented Central Asia vulnerable to an expansive czarist Russia.

Such different colonial experiences not only separated the two regions from each other, but left their Muslim inhabitants with a severe sense of loss which increased with the further erosion of political authority to alien powers. Muslims in the Indian subcontinent tried to meet the new challenges through revitalizing efforts (i.e., the Shah Wali Allah movement), since Iran, Arabia, Turkey, and

North Africa were all faced with equally chaotic situations.¹⁵

Russia's gradual yet persistent conquest of Muslim Central Asia and Caucasia led to an equally bleak isolation for the region, although Muslims on both sides maintained an idealistic affection for each other. Sporadic efforts by South Asian Muslims to help fellow Muslims in Afghanistan through both moral support and political activism under the banner of pan-Islamism could not break the isolation imposed by two mutually hostile colonial powers (i.e., England and Russia), although it did increase Turkic/Iranian feelings of solidarity with and respect for the Muslims of South Asia. During the Khilafat movement, many Muslims from the Indian subcontinent even left their homes in order to more actively help the Afghans and the Turks of Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ Others tried to get a better deal from the communists for the region's Muslims. This quest led to a flurry of diplomatic activity soon after the October Revolution in Russia. Both the Communist Party of India and the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind were established outside British India at a time when the Turks were fighting for their survival.¹⁷ Muslim Central Asia also tried to wrest its independence from Moscow. After a brief moment of success in Azerbaijan, the region was conquered by the Soviet Union. Iran, like Turkey and the Muslim areas of British India, could not help the Caucasian Turks fighting Moscow. And so Central Asia once again slid into oblivion.

Despite the colonization, fragmentation, and intentional retribalization in both regions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mutual fondness among the South Asian and Central Asian Muslims, based on their historical, ethnic, religious, and political commonalities, never subsided. Muslim Central Asia had provided Muslim India with its ruling dynasties. In addition to the intellectual feedback, noted nineteenth-century Muslim writers such as Mirza Ghalib took pride in tracing their ethnic (Turkic) roots from that region. Colonialism, however, led to a serious identity crisis and isolation among the Muslims on both sides of the "border," and the impulse to define their "separatism" from the rest led to similar responses, but not similar consequences, in both regions.

The decisive fragmentation of Muslim Central Asia along linguistic and territorial patterns served the official Soviet policy of creating nationality-based republics, but it severely retarded the inhabitants' long-term political development.

¹⁵A. Shakoor Ahsan, "Turkish Impact on the History and Culture of Pakistan," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 27, no. 2 (April 1990): 17-8. The noted Muslim poet-philosopher Allama Iqbal (1877-1938) was enthused by soul-searching in Kemal Atatürk's Turkey during the turbulent years of the early twentieth century. See M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1971), 157.

¹⁶For an excellent study on the subject, see Aziz Ahmed, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹⁷For further details, see Iftikhar H. Malik, *US-South Asia Relations, 1784-1940: A Historical Perspective* (Islamabad: Area Study Centre, 1988), 228-50.

Isolated from the Muslim world and the West, Muslim Central Asia moved from one blind alley to another. Some joined the ruling hierarchies; some (like the Basmatchi struggle or the Shamilites) resisted, failed, and migrated; some found solace in writing defiant fiction;¹⁸ and a few maintained their spirits by redefining their identity. However, the majority waited for events to take their course.¹⁹

During the Stalin era and the posthumous dispersions until *perestroika*, South Asia and the rest of the world heard very little about Soviet Muslims. This resulted in two views: a) that they had been acculturated into the Soviet body-politic and were better off without any contact with Islam or the Islamic world as such. This was the official Soviet view in the wake of its Russification of Muslim territories through population resettlements (i.e., with the Crimean Tartars or the Kazakhs) or through official lip service to Islam by appointing religious boards to “conduct” Islamic affairs; and b) that time was in the Muslims’ favor, a view popular in the West, as their demographic gains would eventually pose a threat to Soviet authority. Both views looked at the situation in terms of the Cold War and global tensions. Recent events in Eastern Europe and in the Muslim republics have belied such premises which, curiously, belittled the distinct cultural and historical heritage of these people by viewing them through the lense of conformity or defiance, depending upon the imperatives of the respective power bloc.

In fact, despite the severance of contacts, Central Asian Muslims never lost faith in Muslim solidarity with the Islamic world. In the case of those Muslims living within China going through Pakistan on their way to Makkah, a trip made possible by the opening of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), one witnessed scenes of transborder warmth and solidarity. The Iranian revolution and the Afghan resistance, which were taking place just next door, also proved to be the turning point for both the Central Asian Muslims and their Kashmiri counterparts. The recent humbling events in the Gulf have left indelible scars on Muslim minds where, at the popular level, it has been assumed that Islam has become the new focus of an onslaught from the “rest.” Muslims in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Pakistan, due to the West’s cold shoulder vis-à-vis their ordeals in recent years, yearn for massive contacts with Central Asian Muslims who harbor long-term grievances against Moscow’s party apparatus, bureaucratization, forcible Russification, and, worst of all, against the exploitation of their manpower and natural resources.²⁰ Moscow’s unilateral preponderance all through the decades

¹⁸For instance, see Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino* (New York: New American Library, 1971).

¹⁹For further details, see Milan Hauner, “Central Asian Geopolitics in the Last Hundred Years: A Critical Survey from Gorchakov to Gorbachev,” *Central Asian Survey* 8, no. 1 (1989): 1-20.

²⁰See Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Parting of the Ways” and “Party versus Mosque,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (3 October 1991): 16-20. Also see Salamat Ali’s report on efforts for regional cooperation among Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and the Muslim republics as discussed during the Pakistani president’s recent high-profile visit to Iran in *ibid.*, (26 September 1991) and Patrick Cockburn, “Southern Republics Look to Islam,” *The Independent*, 2 October 1991.

of occupation ultimately proved to be a typical white man's burden, and a new generation of Central Asians is debating their multitiered identity in terms of a) their relationship with other ethnic Turkic/Iranian communities on the basis of language and territory, a trend further consolidated by the Soviet concept of nationalities; b) their unequal relationship with the Moscow-centered power apparatus; and c) the reorientation towards other Muslim peoples that had earlier been officially portrayed as corrupt or as lackeys of Western imperialism. The Afghan resistance, enthused by Islam with a special South Asian dimension, tried to operate as a missing link between the two regions, as the decade-long war led to an unprecedented amount of population dislocation in addition to obtaining more international dimensions.²¹

The Soviet Muslims, like their compatriots in China's Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (also long known as Chinese Turkistan) and the Balkans, are not "a lost tribe" as has been recently reported. For instance, the Kazakhs, the most Russified Turkish people, view Islam as a major "part of their national identity."²² The urge to study the Qur'an and to have it translated into the Kazakh language so that it can be understood by the people, the establishment of more mosques in recent months, the organization of an Islamic party in the republic, and the efforts to have a more autonomous press all indicate that Islam is not only the rallying point for the Kazakhs, but that it is also a mechanism used to defy Moscow. Similarly, in China's Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region, which shares a common border with Kazakhstan and has been divided between Russia and China since 1881, one witnesses a growing ethnic solidarity. This trend has been helped by a new railway link between the Chinese and the former Russian parts of Turkistan in the wake of lessening tensions between the erstwhile communist rivals and with more political openness, at least on the Soviet side. In the early part of 1990, the Uighurs gave the Chinese authorities such a tough time that the KKH had to be closed on Peking's plea.

The KKH and the railroad link between the Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region and Turkey have revitalized the ethnic and religious solidarity of the entire region.²³ Uzbekistan, the land of Tamerlaine and Babur and the home of Samarqand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, is strategically located between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kirghizistan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Its local communist party has also witnessed desertions either to Birlık or to the Islamic

²¹Oliver Roy, "Afghanistan: War as a Factor of Entry into Politics," *Central Asian Survey* no. 4 (1989): 43-62.

²²Ahmed Rashid, "Bless Perestroika and Send Korans," *The Independent*, 4 June 1990. The Pakistani correspondent for the English daily was overwhelmed by the reception accorded him at Alma Ata. He noted: "At the Alma Ata mosque I was surrounded by hundreds of believers when they learned that a Pakistani journalist had arrived. 'God bless you for being a Muslim,' said craggy-faced nomads and mountain men as they embraced and kissed me and swamped me with questions."

²³Ahmed Rashid, "Ancient Race Reasserts Itself on Sino-Soviet Steppes," *ibid.*, 5 June 1990.

party. Even its elite feels a severe sense of alienation with the Europhile leadership in Moscow.²⁴ The Uzbeks, Central Asia's largest non-European nationality, felt economically exploited because they were largely deprived of the benefits of their Russian-imposed single-product economy—cotton. They were thus the first Central Asian people to declare sovereignty (on 20 June 1990) by passing a declaration during the very first session of the new parliament. By September 1991, Kirghizistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan had followed the Uzbeks' lead by declaring the independence of their respective republics and the end of Russian/Soviet colonialism. Within the last few months, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has received Margaret Thatcher, James Baker, and Lee Kuan Yew (former prime minister of Singapore). In late 1991, the president of Uzbekistan was planning a visit to Pakistan in the wake of promises to establish direct diplomatic, commercial, and cultural links with the latter.

Lately, the fear of nuclear proliferation has further exacerbated anti-Russian feelings among the Uzbeks and other Central Asian elites. Corruption and squabbling among the local communist leadership, the presence of non-Turkic ruling elites, and the region's continued alienation from both Moscow and the Muslim world have increased ethnic and religious identification, a trend that has sometimes resulted in bloodshed. Moscow, under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, has been projecting itself as the guardian of stability, prosperity, and interethnic harmony in a region which might otherwise fall easy prey to an unending ethnic holocaust and religious fanaticism. Such a posture was well received in the West, which brands any Central Asian movement inspired by Islam as fundamentalism.²⁵ When Yeltsin sent in the troops to quell the massive Chechen rebellion during November 1991, very few voices in the West objected, and it was only due to the local massive resilience that the Russians were deterred. An editorial in *The New York Times* underlined the need for economic reforms in regions like Kirghizistan so that a market-based economy could develop and eventually prevent the proposed commonwealth's disintegration.²⁶ Such welcome measures, belated though they may be, cannot and will not guarantee the continuity of a Soviet/Russian state constructed on a colonial legacy lacking

²⁴Shirin Akiner, "Recent Political Events in Soviet Central Asia." Paper presented at St. Antony's College, Oxford, UK, 11 June 1990. Also see Ahmed Rashid, "A New Scourge in the Land of Tamburlaine," *The Independent*, 6 June 1990.

²⁵In mid-June 1991, hundreds of Muslims in Daghestan protested in the Georgian and Russian republics, asking for permission to make the pilgrimage to Makkah. The security forces tried to disperse them with water hoses and eventually resorted to firing. BBC World Service Report, monitored in Oxford, UK, 14 June 1991.

²⁶"Soviet Commonwealth" (editorial), reproduced in *The International Herald Tribune*, 15 June 1990. One year later, the Western media felt that economic cooperation among a loosely integrated Soviet Union might save it from the reappearance of mutually antagonistic and internecine nationalisms. See "One Soviet Center, or 12?" (editorial), *The New York Times*, reprinted in *The International Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1991.

historical, cultural, ethnic, or even politicoeconomic commonalities between its Slavic and Turkic/Muslim populations. Both region and ethnicity, solidified in terms of clear demographic majorities in specific areas (conveniently defined by Stalin as "nationalities") with similar historical traditions, remain binding forces for Muslim Central Asians. In fact, with all of the revolutionary changes around and within the rapidly disintegrating Soviet Union, it is the continuity of the Moscow-dominated state that is in serious doubt.

As of late 1991, the former Soviet Union seemed to be heading towards a complete transformation through a) Lithuania-type negotiations leading to "balkanization"; b) complete anarchy; c) a new, loose confederalism; or 4) an eventual military takeover. Whether one is in Moscow or the individual republics, the writing on the wall is quite clear. It has to be remembered that Islam is the foundation of a larger identity for those who, like Muslims elsewhere, remain "secularization-resistant"²⁷ and, basing their case on "separatism," see themselves in comparative terms vis-à-vis the surrounding non-Muslim majorities.²⁸

South Asia at the Crossroads

All the way from Afghanistan to the borders of Myanmar (formerly Burma), South Asia today remains the most turbulent and volatile region. Within it are ongoing struggles varying from complete liberation to the establishment of more participatory democratic systems based on ethnic pluralism. Afghanistan has so far defied all attempts to find a workable resolution to its thirteen-year-old crisis, which was only exacerbated by the Soviet intervention of 1979. As the United States and the Soviet Union were, during those years, preoccupied with other more significant problems and Najibullah was therefore able to successfully exploit the rifts within the Afghan opposition (the Mujahideen), Afghanistan is now faced with a bloody stalemate and the presence of one-third of its population residing in refugee camps outside its borders.

With the departure of Soviet troops, whom the Mujahideen had fought on the basis of ethnoreligious solidarity, the current Kabul regime has tried to appease its opponents by establishing its ethnic and religious bona fides. However, its opponents continue to view the current government as lacking any legitimacy.

²⁷Ernest Gellner, "Islam and Marxism: Some Comparisons," *International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (January 1991): 2. A similar argument has been made in the case of the British Muslims. See Tariq Ali, "The Turmoil of Islam" (book review), *The Guardian Weekly*, 25 February 1990.

²⁸For a detailed report, see Edward W. Desmond, "Who Will Rule the Cemeteries?," *Time*, 16 July 1990, pp. 20-25; Derek Brown, "Afghan Factions Turn Guns on Each Other," *The Guardian*, 10 July 1990; and Ahmed Rashid, "Fundamentalists Push for Victory in Afghan Civil War," *The Independent*, 5 October 1991.

Any tangible solution to the future of this devastated land has to involve various contestants for Afghan political supremacy, regional neighbors (i.e., Pakistan and Iran), and to come with guarantees from the United States and Russia. Elections under the auspices of the Islamic bloc and UN mediators after the cessation of hostilities as well as negative symmetry could lead to such an amicable scenario. Moscow had, all along, insisted on retaining the Najibullah regime since it operated as an effective buffer between Central Asia and the Muslim world. Even now, many former communists holding public office in Central Asia would probably feel more comfortable with Najibullah in power.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, it would naturally like to see a friendly regime in Kabul which, most of all, would actually represent Afghanistan's population through a mutually acceptable formula enabling refugee repatriation and the cessation of hostilities. Pakistan would certainly prefer an interim arrangement acceptable to all shades of Afghan opinion so that the country may experience peace and normalcy. Pakistan's main stumbling block in developing a closer relationship with the Central Asian republics is the unresolved issue of Afghanistan. Pakistan is anxious to get the dispute resolved for the benefit of all. The Mujahideen, after an arduous siege, were able to conquer Khost in April 1991 and have laid siege to Gardez, another important garrison town not far from Kabul. In the meantime, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been trying to persuade the Mujahideen to accept a recent formula announced by the UN secretary-general, one which without saying anything of the future role of Najibullah almost agrees to most of the shared perceptions on various sides for a solution to the Afghan civil war.²⁹

In neighboring Kashmir, the persistent movement for a plebiscite has become synonymous with self-determination—confirming that New Delhi, no matter how hard it has tried over the decades, could not sweep the issue under the rug. The Kashmiris, disappointed by UN failures to conduct a plebiscite in the face of Indian obstinacy, alienated from a predominantly Hindu India, and strengthened in their “separateness” due to the favorable forces of geography and demography, eventually took up arms.³⁰ An armed *intifāḍah*, already costing more than three thousand lives and resulting in direct rule from New Delhi as well as prolonged curfews, has now become a total revolt inspired by a Kashmiri Muslim identity that refuses to be a permanent hostage to Indian secularism. Encouraged by recent events in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the Kashmiris continue to intensify their struggle and, like their Central Asian coreligionists,

²⁹Suzanne Goldenberg, “Inside Story: The Mojahedin in Crisis: The Khost Busters,” *The Guardian Weekly Magazine*, 15-16 June 1991 and “Afghanistan's Deciding Battle,” *The Economist*, 15 June 1991.

³⁰For a comprehensive study on the dispute, see Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy* (Hertingfordbury, UK: Roxford Books, 1991).

they base their case on the foundation of long-term grievances under alien rule. India, on the other hand, would like to blame Pakistan, its traditional rival, for fanning the flames of ethnic violence in both the Punjab and Kashmir. However, the forces of history and the political ethos emanating from religious *cum* ethnic separateness belie such an externalization of the issue. Like Turkic Muslims, Kashmiri Muslims at one level identify themselves as being different from the rest of the Indians by emphasizing their *kashmiriat*, while at the second tier of their identity they define themselves in terms of religion (Islam being the denominator). At the third tier is their identification with the Muslim world at large which, as in the case of the Muslims of Central Asia, is a direct result of the majority-minority political patterns within the Indian union. Kashmir, like Central Asia, is not a question of law-and-order to be tackled with a state's coercive machinery, or just a terrorist outburst to be matched with sophisticated weapons. The present insurgency in Kashmir, which enjoys widespread moral and political support in the Muslim world,³¹ is not a foreign-inspired insurgency but one growing out of decades of Hindu/Indian dominance.

Conclusion

Given the aspiration as well as the potential for self-determination among Central Asian and Kashmiri Muslims, one is apt to generalize that the region, otherwise not on the main agenda of the global powers, will see more political activism in the coming years. Due to the refusal of the present regimes to bow to the will of the people, one can foresee a long period of violent outbursts and subsequent repression that will further alienate these Muslims from Moscow and New Delhi (and Kabul). The regionalization of these issues, more predictable in the case of South Asia (with an ironic scenario like India attacking Pakistan in order to neutralize its long-time support for the Kashmiris), would further complicate the issue instead of resolving it. Even in the case of the Khalistan movement in the Punjab (mainly inspired by strong sentiments of ethnoreligious separatism), New Delhi's policy of quarantine through impenetrable border walls, accompanied by an unrelenting crackdown on the otherwise peaceful plains of the Punjab by the world's fourth largest military establishment, and even sporadic political efforts have all failed to bear any fruit. India's suzerainty over Kashmir is interpreted by Kashmiri Muslims as a foreign occupation, for the Pakistanis it is an injustice in view of the violation of the partition plan and the UN resolutions, and for the Muslim world at large it is a case of denying self-

³¹In a typical manner, on 10 June 1991, the security forces posted to Kashmir, on the pretext of avenging the death of a fellow trooper, opened fire indiscriminately on the streets of Srinagar and killed more than forty people. See *The Times*, 11 June 1991.

determination to a Muslim community by a predominantly non-Muslim country.

The ethnonational movements of Afghanistan, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam, and Sri Lanka have become armed revolts demanding independence. All of this unrest has made South Asia one of the most volatile areas in the world. Another contributory factor to the strength of these movements is the existence of state-dominated superstructures which enhance the sense of alienation among various ethnic groups in multiethnic South Asian societies. The intermittent violence in the Pakistani province of Sindh among certain ethnic groups testifies to the bankruptcy of existing administrative structures and the unilateral nature of the state's institutions, all of which have no in-built mechanisms for the participation of the "have-nots." As these oppressed groups become unable to air their grievances peacefully, they turn to violence. Pakistan, and not separate homelands, remains as the diaspora for these ethnic groups which are clamoring for judicious policies, efficient systems, and an egalitarian existence within the country.

In Sindh, Islam and Pakistani nationhood are not an issue, as the ethnic violence is a result of political alienation and economic frustration among both urban and rural youths. Ethnic solidarity experienced a major increase during the period of martial law, which was characterized by political suffocation and imbalanced economic policies, and was accompanied by quick dramatic changes in Sindh's demography. Urban centers like Karachi, Hyderabad, and Sukkur witnessed spates of periodic violence (exacerbated by sniper fire) at a time when Pakistan was still grappling with millions of well-armed Afghan refugees in addition to many other illegal immigrants and facing increasing Indian hostility over Kashmir. In rural Sindh, dacoits (bandits) covertly supported by the local feudal class would use various pressure tactics, such as kidnapping non-Sindhis for ransom, whereas in the cities the electoral, economic, and organizational powers enjoyed by the Urdu-speakers through parties like the Muhajir Qawmi Movement (MQM) is manifested in terms of street agitation and intermittent violence. Interestingly, the ethnonational parties (movements) are led by youths, in many cases university graduates, who provide the willing recruits.³²

Despite the antecedents of ethnic violence over the preceding years, Sindh is not a lost cause, given the fact that all parties have stakes in the framework of Pakistani electoral politics, thus underscoring the need for a twin-track policy. Along with the confiscation of illegal weapons and the containment of both urban

³²For various interpretations on the ethnic problem in Sindh, see Hamza Alavi, "Nationhood and the Nationalities in Pakistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay) 24 (8 July 1989); Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National Movements of Pakistan: Domestic and International Factors* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988); and Iftikhar H. Malik, "Ethnicity and Political Ethos in Sindh: A Case Study of the Muhajireen of Karachi," in *Migration, Ethnicity and Diaspora: The South Asian Experience*, eds. Milton Israel and N. Wagle (Toronto: South Asian Institute, 1991).

and rural criminal gangs, multidimensional dialogues among the political leaders on decentralization and administrative and economic reforms could resolve the issue. In a democratic Pakistan, there are positive indications for the acceptance of a plural society accompanying the necessary changes and adjustments, and one feels optimistic that the lessons of 1971 (when East Pakistan seceded to become Bangladesh) have not gone unlearned.

It might take a few more decisive years for the Muslims of Central and South Asia to steer their way to a more hospitable and amicable future. Most of all, these Muslims have to deal with the changed exigencies of the times: political and intellectual developments that can pull them out of their current states of inertia must be pursued; postcolonial structures must be demolished so as to meet the needs of the times; and a participatory system, one allowing historic pluralism based on "unity in diversity," must be the *modus operandi* used to achieve all of these objectives. Muslims cannot live with a miniature Great Wall of China around them, just as the West cannot brush their problems aside without pausing to see the root cause. The world is more interdependent and, after all, many problems in the Muslim world are not of its own making. The West owes an immense duty to the world at large and to the Muslim world in particular, given its historical unequal relationship with the latter ever since the Crusades.³³ In an interdependent world, with Muslim regions so close to the West and Islam as the second major religion in a multiethnic North America and Europe, mutual religious and ethnic sensibilities demand a better appreciation and a more humane understanding.

³³William Pfaff, in a short article on Islam, outlined three main problems confronted by the Islamic world: a) the absence of a historical Muslim Enlightenment *cum* Industrial Revolution; b) the colonial legacy; and c) the consolidation of repressive orders throughout the Muslim world. All of these have compounded the Muslims' dilemma in the late twentieth century. See *The International Herald Tribune*, 11 July 1990.