Asia: the Emerging Hub of World Muslim Terrorism

Raphael Israeli[1]

Part I:
International Islamic Terrorism: From Origins to Globalization
Part II:
Islam on the March: the Case of Asia

[1] **Raphael Israeli** is a Professor of Islamic, Middle Eastern and Chinese History at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. **Professor Israeli** is the author of over 15 books and 80 scholarly articles in those domains. A member of the Steering Committee of the **ACPR,** his work in Hebrew, French and English frequently appears in leading international publications including *NATIV*.

PART I:

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC TERRORISM: FROM ORIGINS TO GLOBALIZATION

The Predicament and its Terminology

When the Oklahoma City horrendous act of terror unfolded before the incredulous eyes of Americans, who could not digest why a fellow American could be so hatred-filled and evil-motivated as to eliminate dozens of his innocent countrymen, they sought solace in the law-enforcement system of the US, to bring the culprit to justice, but the whole horror and its ramifications did not transcend the American borders. Few looked for "justifications" to the crime or "understood" the "frustration" of the criminal, deeming mass-killing of this scale an out of the ordinary and aberrant behavior worthy of unmitigated condemnation and contempt.

But when on September 11, the terrorist act of the millennium wreaked havoc upon New York and Washington, America woke up to a new reality of panic and disarray, because the perpetrators were guided from the outside and American justice could not investigate and lay its hands on them within the perimeters of its territory. Hence, the process of seeking justice beyond American borders immediately took on the form of a worldwide war, which became instantly the concern of all nations. At the same time, however, precisely due to the international nature of this developing conflict, "justifications", "apologetics" and "rationalizations" were uttered which forced the American administration to chart its way as it went along.

President Bush was, at first, committed to "punish" and "bring to justice" the perpetrators, then he declared a "crusade" against terror and against its heads who were "wanted, dead or alive", then he gave the choice to all countries to either side with him or bear the onus of opposing him. And finally he resolved that terrorism had to be fought at its roots, and he set out for an all-out war that disregarded collateral damage to civilians, and vowed to take it from one target to another until international terrorism is uprooted and defeated. While his initial reactions were shot from the hip and sounded vindictive more than rational, his later actions were more in line with a long term, determined and sustained policy of waging war and winning it.

Terrorism in its current manifestation did not begin in New York, nor did it originate in Afghanistan. It is essential not only to pinpoint the stage where it has sprung from, but also to be aware of the vocabulary and definitions which articulate and govern it. It is also imperative to realize the worldwide import of its spread, bearing in mind that 56 countries in the world today define themselves as Muslim, or Muslim-majority, spanning the two continents of Asia and Africa, and that sizeable Muslim minorities have been implanting themselves in the West in the past few decades, enabling some fundamentalist trends to take root there under the instigation and guidance of core Islamic fundamentalist countries such as Iran, the Sudan and Afghanistan.

Without attributing to Islam as a faith, or to Muslim countries as political entities, it is nonetheless a fact that many of the brewing domestic and international conflicts are led by Muslims, in the name of Islam, from Muslim countries or under their wings, or by Muslim minorities under non-Islamic rule. This must signify something in terms of Muslim ideological involvement in terror, and especially in terms of the grassroots support it seems to have among large portions of the Muslim populace, Muslim governments' attempts at concealment notwithstanding. This means that President Bush's ultimatum to those countries

to identify themselves as either friends or foes, has left them no choice but to mumble something about their friendly attitudes, while oppressing the spontaneous cries hailing bin Laden as their hero. Had the American president given them the choice between eradicating terrorism in their midst first and then join the coalition (not the Crusade, which is abhorrent to them), or incur the wrath of the West, a different gamut of voices might have emanated from there that would have made it easier for America to distinguish between friend and foe. That was not done, allowing many terrorist-sheltering entities to masquerade as "allies" and anti-terrorists, like Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority.

Before September 11, the possibility was afforded to many countries that harbor terrorism, to escape that label by imputing the horrors to "suicide bombers", implying that those perpetrators who by definition were weak of heart and "frustrated", were also by definition unstable and unpredictable, and therefore little could be done against them to scuttle their schemes. But after the New York and Washington harrowing events, the center of gravity of finger-pointing was moved in the West to the bases which had allowed the terrorists to be recruited, trained, indoctrinated, dispatched, financed and supported, and which were until then immune to retaliation, for fear of violating the sovereignty of the harboring nation or of "harming the peace process" in the Middle East. By targeting the heads of the terrorist organization of *al-Qa`idah,* and implying that other terrorist operators might follow, the US has signaled to the world that these authors of horror and intimidation do not dispatch suicidal types to kill themselves, but determined and highly indoctrinated murderers to kill others and to wreak terror on others, who might more appropriately be dubbed "*Islamikaze*".

The Original Sin

If until about two decades ago we used to divide the Muslim countries into monarchical-conservative-capitalist-moderate-stable and pro-Western (like Iran under the Shah, Libya under the Sanussi King, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait, Jordan, etc.) versus republican-revolutionary-socialist- radical-unstable and anti-Western (like Nasserite Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria and the two Yemens), the lineup since the Iranian Revolution (1979) has somewhat been reshuffled. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, which was also devised for foreign consumption, showed that Islamic radicalism under a revolutionary republican government, unlike Muslim conservatism under pro-Western wings, could escape Western tutelage, indeed rebel against it, and gain huge popular support. It also proved that unlike the corrupt illegitimate rulers who had acceded to power and held on to it previously, the Islamic Revolution drew its legitimacy from Islam and the rule of the *shari`ah*, and its leaders enjoyed a reputation of impeccable integrity, something that further increased its popularity.

Beyond the tremendous efforts made by the Iranian regime to export the Revolution and to lend legitimacy to Terrorism International that they were determined to lead and coordinate, and which would generate the globalization of terrorism that will be discussed below, one has first to account for the fact that Iran was the direct or indirect trigger of four major wars that have plagued Asia since the 1980s. Although those wars did not always use Iran as their springboard, it can surely be said that Teheran was the foundation stone from which those wars have emanated and polluted the international arena in the past two decades. Those wars were first centered on the Persian Gulf (the first Gulf War which pitted Iraq against Iran – two Muslim countries – and the second Gulf War triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) in which a broad coalition of European and Arab countries were involved, led by the US. Then, the center of gravity of the conflict moved eastwards and two more wars were fought, caused first by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, i.e. a Communist power against a Muslim country,

and then the second Afghan War, where the Americans and some of their allies tackled Muslim fundamentalists.

The Iranian connection is evident. The first Gulf War (1980-88) was launched by Saddam Hussein in direct response to the threat posed by the Iranian Revolution, for fear that it might spread into his *Shi`ite* territory. While it was a clearly preemptive strike, it was miscalculated in the sense that Saddam had badly underestimated revolutionary Iran's stamina and commitment to defend its territory, and what he thought would be an easy walk into the Arab-populated and oil-rich territory of Khuzistan, became a World War One-like war of trenches that were drenched with the blood of both parties and ended at about the same positions of departure, one million casualties, eight years and tens of billions of dollars later. Saddam had also eyed the Iranian seashore adjacent to his territory which would have allowed him a safe haven for the fleet he wished to develop, beyond the 30 mile narrow outlet to the Gulf he had at *Shatt-al-Arab*, in order to impose his hegemony in the Gulf. He thought that due to the isolation of revolutionary Iran, which was perceived as posing a threat to all of American *protégés* in the Middle East, no one would mind if he gnawed at her territory, a proposition that had become vital for him once his enmity with Teheran had exploded and the necessity to maintain a fleet that matched Iran's had emerged.

Having failed in his attempt, and after having assured a *rapprochement* to America, and a close partnership with Egypt and Jordan, and "pacified" the Kurdish North by using gas poison against its population, Saddam turned to the Western side of the Gulf in order to achieve at Kuwaiti expense what he had failed to attain in the previous attempt against his Iranian sworn enemy. He invaded, thus setting off the second Gulf War (1990-91) but was repulsed by the American coalition with his dream remaining unfulfilled. Therefore, and taking account of Iraq's geostrategic plight in the Gulf, Iraq is bound to try again and again, regardless of whether Saddam or someone else is in power, unless two conditions are filled: one, that the rivalry between revolutionary Iran and Iraq is patched up to the extent that any Iraqi leader would regard it as settled, and that Iran no longer poses a menace to him; and two, that the regime in Iraq is democratized to an extent that an accountable ruler would be reluctant to launch another round of war against his neighbors. The prospects on both grounds are dimmer than dim.

Out of the same considerations as Saddam's, emanating from the fear lest the Iranian Muslim revolutionary zeal might spill over its boundaries into its Muslim republics of Central Asia, the Soviet Union even preceded Iraq in its preemptive strike on Christmas Eve of 1979, against adjoining Afghanistan where Islamic fundamentalism was believed to brew. This time it was a Communist power which took on the Muslims of that mountainous central Asian country, where hordes of *Mujahideen (Jihad* fighters) soon assembled, based in Peshawar, Pakistan, and trained, armed and financed by the CIA, as part of its endeavor to topple the "Empire of Evil". Not all *Mujahideen* followed that call, because others were manipulated by the Iranians and had other axes to grind. It took ten years of harsh fighting to wear thin Soviet overextended power, and to convince it to withdraw in disgrace, something that probably facilitated its demise. However, Soviet retreat only augured two major developments which were to haunt Afghanistan and much of Central Asia, the Muslim world and Great Power politics: the civil war in Afghanistan which ushered in the *Taliban* regime, and the phenomenon of the *Afghans*.

The *Taliban* took over the rule in Kabul in 1996 at the culmination of the hopeless civil war which had pitted for six years, since the evacuation of the Soviets in 1989, various *Mujahideen* factions against each other for the takeover of the battered capital. That battle involved, as usual in Afghanistan, inter-tribal rivalries (the *Pashtun* majority against a

coalition of Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara minorities); inter-faith controversies (the *Sunni* majority versus the *Shi`ite* minority); and contradictory loyalties to outside powers (Pakistan who supported the *Pashtuns*, the radical and ruthless Gulbuddin Hikmatyar – the client of the Iranians, and the forces of Shah Mas`ud, later known as the Northern Alliance, who were sponsored by the West, and occasionally by the Russians too). The utter destruction of Kabul and impoverishment of the entire country, enticed the *Pashtun* young scholars of Kandahar (the *Taliban*), who had graduated from Pakistani *Madrasas* (religious schools) and were sustained by them, to launch a sweeping Northern expedition to save the unity of the country, at the expense of Mas`ud's forces who continued to resist them in their shrinking turf in the North.

The *Taliban* takeover, supported by Pakistan, and vastly popular throughout much of the country, was at first seen as a hopeful sign that the country was heading towards unity, stability and reconstruction, but it soon transpired that the stringent Islamic puritanism of the new regime, which destroyed any signs of non-Islamic culture, oppressed women, defied the West and its civilization and enforced an extreme form of Muslim conformism, began to lose some of its initial appeal. Moreover, since bin Laden's *al-Qa`idah* had been expelled from the Sudan, upon American insistence following the 1998 disastrous bombing of American embassies in East Africa, the avowedly anti-Western *Taliban* accorded it shelter in their country, thus turning themselves into a pariah state, and electing what they viewed as confessional integrity and devotion to their faith over any sort of pragmatic submission to American *diktat*.

The other outcome of the first Afghan War was the emergence of the *Afghanis* in inter-Muslim politics. These were the tens of thousands of volunteers from Arab and other Muslim states (mainly Saudis and Egyptians, but also Moroccans, Jordanians, Chechens, etc.), who had been recruited, armed, financed and trained by the US and its proxies to help defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan. When that war was over, its graduates returned to their countries of origin, battle-hardened, immensely motivated and determined to produce Islamic regimes to replace the illegitimate and corrupt governments in place. They caused domestic turmoil in Egypt, Algeria, Chechnya, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, or enlisted in international Islamic endeavors in order to promote fundamentalist Muslim regimes at home or in other Muslim societies and an enhanced Muslim consciousness among Muslim communities in the West. For example, they were active during the Bosnian War, and later among the Muslim Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, in the service of Islam. We also found them operating in the *Islamikaze*[1] training camps in Afghanistan under the *Taliban*, in Chechnya and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

The most important and lasting international impact of the Afghanis, however, has been their enrollment into *al-Qa`idah*, which has been the direct cause and trigger of the second Afghan War, this time by the Americans and their allies against the *Taliban* for giving shelter to terrorism, and with a view of seizing bin Laden and his gang. What this war has shown, though it is seemingly only a remote fourth link relating back to the Iranian foundation stone, is that the Iranian Revolution and its quest for export are still live and kicking. For, though at odds with bin Laden and the *Taliban*, the Iranians are looking with satisfaction at the 60 bases of *al-Qa`idah* that bin Laden has succeeded in establishing worldwide, on five continents, to fight the daily nitty-gritty war of reviving Islamic consciousness among Muslim communities everywhere, and then to move to the stage of action against their host countries. As has been evinced in this war, the Afghanis are the hard core of the fighters of *al-Qa`idah*, and most devoted missionaries. These agitators have proved to the world that while Muslim governments have submitted to American pressures and threats, and in appearance have

joined the American "coalition", or at least have given it their blessing or refrained from acting openly against it, the populace, media and public opinion in those countries have remained, to a great extent, pro-bin Laden.

The Globalization of Islamic Terrorism

Until September 11, and in spite of occasional disclosures of the networks of international Islamic terrorism, the international community usually treated these revelations as "exaggerations" or misplaced "accusations", or as a figment of the imagination of their authors. Thus, when American investigative journalist, Steve Emerson, produced his one-hour television documentary about "*Jihad* in America", showing the intensity of the Islamists' commitment among the Muslim immigrant communities in America, including in New Jersey which sheltered Sheikh Abdul-Rahman, the mastermind of the first attempt against the Twin Towers, public opinion remained rather indifferent. Apparently people react to actual disasters, not to potential dangers, great as they may be. Emerson and other writers also described in detail the training camps of those terrorists in Afghanistan, warned against the front "charitable organizations" which spread all over the US and collected money from innocent and unsuspecting common Americans for the "orphans" or "victims of aggression" in the Middle East, while in fact they used the funds for terrorist organizations. But all those disclosures did not convince the Clinton Administration to take crucial measures against those organizations, which if taken in time would have saved many of the strictures of today. The halfhearted and toothless steps adopted then by the American governments and services in fact facilitated the continuation of the terrorists' blooming on American soil that would a few years later become the victim of its liberal and unmindful policies.

Thus, though globalization of the Islamic terrorist activity has nothing new to it since it was initiated, activated and acknowledged by the terrorists themselves, it was the West, due to shortsighted policies, who refused to take cognizance of the situation as it was. The process of globalization took shape over the 1980s and 1990s along three parallel but not unrelated courses: Terrorist International, sponsored by the Iranian Revolution; the Afghanis who became its most zealous agents; and lately *al-Qa`idah*, made out of fanatic *Sunnis*, who could not see eye-to-eye with their *Shi`ite* competitors for the leadership of the world Muslim Revolution. In fact, *al-Qa`idah*, as well as the Afghanis, the main actors in Islamic terrorism internationally, had chosen Turabi's Sudan, the first bastion of *Sunni* fundamentalist Islam in the 1980s, and then turned to Afghanistan when they were ejected from there. However, while the Afghanis were distributed all over the Islamic world, according to their nations of origin, *al-Qa`idah* was concerned from the start with building international networks to be funded by bin Laden's private fortune, and moneys collected from other Muslim donors.

Iran, as the first agent of globalization has established the *Hizbullah* in Lebanon and used it as its international arm of terror, notably against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires and London in the early 1990s, but most consistently on the Israeli-Lebanese border until it compelled the Israeli public opinion to force on its government an early, unnecessary and perhaps fateful withdrawal which has cost, among other things, *al-Aqsa Intifada* on the West Bank and Gaza, where the Lebanese model has been emulated by the Palestinians. Iran has also meddled in the re-Islamization of the Balkans (first Bosnia, then Kosovo and now Macedonia), and hosted the annual coordinating meeting of all Islamic terrorist organizations in Teheran.

The Afghanis have lent to Islamic terrorism another of its international aspects inasmuch as they ensured the presence in practically most of the Islamic countries of their own

combatants, who not only stirred unrest in their own countries in attempts to topple the regimes, but also contributed to the rise of militant Islam in areas such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Western countries, which in turn produced the wave of terror we have been witnessing. The latest manifestation of globalization has been best expressed by the 60 odd bases across the world of *al-Qa`idah*, all of bin Laden's doing. *Al-Qa`idah*, literally The Base, refers not only physically to the hub of international Islamic terrorism, recently identified in Afghanistan until new centers emerge, but also metaphorically to the core of the idea of Islamic revolution and confrontation with the West, which will spread, conquer the world and rid it of Western-Israeli corruption. Hence the inherent relationship between the two, and the usual Muslim rhetoric which invariably lumps them together.

The destruction of *al-Qa`idah* by the US, has so far been confined to Afghanistan, and to set out against all its 60 bases, especially as long as bin Laden and his operatives are alive, would neither be a quick nor a totally feasible endeavor. Its survival would then depend on the sort of American determination to pursue its operation worldwide, even when the cracks in the already tenuous pro-American coalition grow wider as the turn of Arab (like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, the Sudan, the Palestinian Authority or Yemen) or other Islamic countries (such as Iran, Somalia and further afield) comes.

Words of Conclusion

The West's and Israel's major dilemma in fighting international Islamic terrorism lies in the fact that they cannot succeed worldwide unless they ally themselves with regimes where bases harboring terrorism exist, or are in close proximity to those bases. However, those regimes are for the most part illegitimate inasmuch as they are autocratic, anti-democratic and at variance with their populace which has been nurtured by anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric and incitement over the years. What is the West to do? Attack the terrorists over the heads of the governments that ostensibly ally themselves to it, if they prove unwilling or unable to eliminate terror themselves (e.g. Pakistan in Kashmir, Lebanon and Syria with the *Hizbullah* or the Palestinian Authority with *Hamas*)? It is always tricky to prove that governments that make fiery speeches against terrorism also do, or do not do, something to annihilate it. Even the formula of "100% effort" which falls far short of the "100% results" wording is not measurable.

Another aspect of this issue is the double game whereby the West promotes democracy, but when Islam comes on top as in Iran, Algeria, the Sudan or Afghanistan due to popular support, or makes gains as in Jordan, Saudi Arabia or the Palestinian Authority, it is the West who rushes head-on to support the illegitimate anti-Islamic governments in place and throws its fate with them (Pakistan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia to name only a few), disregarding popular sentiment. Maybe, instead of taking sides between fundamentalists and their oppressors, the West should encourage the democratic process and accept its consequences. If the current autocrats should win, though this is difficult to envisage, they will achieve legitimacy and perhaps become less autocratic; if the fundamentalists should win, then, as in Iran and in the Sudan, the constraints of government might moderate them in the long run despite a commitment to Islamic legitimacy. It is noteworthy that this hope did not work in Afghanistan, which elected Islamic puritanical extremism and sheltering terrorism to rational political reasoning. But then, at the very least, the West will know that it sets out to punish not only the leaders who harbor terrorism but the whole nation which lends them legitimacy and support.

PART II:

Islam on the March: the Case of Asia

Introduction

Much of the torment and turmoil in our contemporary world is connected one way or another with Islamic territory, doctrine or politics. Not that Islam as such is necessarily inherently prone to conflict and strife, but many fundamentalist trends therein, from *Hizbullah* and *Hamas* in the Middle East, via bin Laden and his disciples in Afghanistan and elsewhere, to the *Abu Sayyaf* group in the Southern Philippines, have vowed to have their way via violence. Thus, we see a mounting wave of Muslim fundamentalist groups sweeping vast areas of the globe, within Islamdom or in countries to which Muslims lay claim or are involved in all manner of armed struggle.

Examples abound across the world map, especially in the Middle East and Asia: Muslim-related strife in such countries as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria and Egypt; anti-Christian manifestations in Indonesia, Egypt, the Philippines, the Sudan, Black Africa and Israel; regional conflicts in the Middle East, Kashmir and Central Asia; Muslim secessionist movements in Chinese Turkestan, the Caucasus, Thailand, the Philippines, Burma and the Middle East; discontent and subversion among Muslim minorities in Western countries and Israel; Muslim regimes imposing re-Islamization of their societies, often amidst strife, like Iran, Afghanistan and the Sudan; and violent Islamic opposition groups in countries where the regimes in place resist these moves, such as Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and others.

Cause for tension is also provided by local and international Muslim terrorist movements operating in and from the Middle East, and in South, East, Central and Southeastern Asia, or worldwide against American, Western and Israeli interests, like in Saudi Arabia, East Africa, Argentina, on European and American soil, and certainly and most visibly in Israel and its neighboring countries. Lately, illegal immigration of Muslim refugees, from North Africa, Iran, Iraq and the rest of the Arab world, to Western countries and Australia, and the consequent spillover of the Arab-Israeli dispute into the Muslim diasporas in the West, have also added fuel to the fire of this universal Muslim unrest. Indeed, these Muslim minorities of immigrants (legal and illegal) have spread their terror against Jewish populations in Western countries as part of the current wave of the Palestinian-Israeli violence, and apparently in response to it. They torched Jewish synagogues, assaulted Jewish individuals, voiced abuse against Jews and Israel, burned Israeli (and American) flags in public "ceremonies", and desecrated Jewish sites by the dozens in such a variety of places as Canada, Western Europe, the US and Australia.

To map out and analyze these worldwide phenomena, and to find out whether they are all causally or organizationally interconnected, one would have to examine the long list of these events over the past two decades or so, trying to detect the unifying themes which have evolved over time, and the particular circumstances of each cluster of events as they unfold in space. But this task is beyond the purview of this essay, which will focus mainly on the landmass of Asia, especially the trouble spots of the Central and Southeastern parts of the continent.

The Timeless Ideology of *Jihad*

No doubt, this wave of revivalist Islam in Asia is connected to, fed by and in turn feeds into the mood of *Jihad* which pervades many Muslim countries and societies worldwide. This *Jihad*, manipulated by charismatic and militant clerics such as Sheikh Yassin (*Hamas*), Sheikh Nasrallah (*Hizbullah*) or Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, is particularly directed against the US, as the arch-representative of the West. It vents in an explosive fashion an accumulated rage which has its roots not only in the perceived Western domination of the world and the corruptive effect it has had on Muslim youth everywhere, by its pop culture, consumerism and permissiveness, but especially in the fact that Muslim societies have remained haplessly trailing behind while the hated West has been strengthening its hold on the world. Therefore, the return to Islam, both by re-Islamization of society and the imposition of *Shari`ah*, and by embracing Islamic politics of confrontation with the West, have been seen by these circles as the panacea to disengage from the spiral of decay and to chart new paths for modernity-cum-Islam, independently of the West, and even in collision with it.

Bin Laden, who has made it his holy duty to eradicate American presence from all Muslim countries, also wants to replace the corrupt and autocratic regimes in place, those mistakenly deemed as "moderate" by the West, by Muslim radical governments, the like of which have taken power in Iran, Afghanistan and the Sudan in recent years. For that purpose, bin Laden and his followers and peers not only subvert the existing regimes throughout Islamdom, but also profess physical elimination of Americans (civilian and military alike) wherever they can be found. *Newsweek International* (February 20, 2001) reports that a fundamentalist cell in Chechnya has posted on the Internet, a map of the world which will become entirely Muslim within a century. Naturally, such an enterprise can be achieved only when victory is won on both the domestic and external fronts.

On their way to victory, the militant groups are cultivated and aided by the three Muslim fundamentalist regimes mentioned above, and Saudi Arabia. The latter provide a living proof that Islamic regimes are feasible and workable in the modern world, and can wield considerable influence in world affairs. Those regimes support Muslim radicals elsewhere to achieve the same: Iran sustains the *Hamas*, the *Hizbullah*, the Bosnian Muslims and the Kosovo Liberation Army; the Sudan provides training grounds and launching pads for activists against the Egyptian and other African regimes: Saudi Arabia supplies funds to Muslim activists throughout Africa, Asia and Europe; and Afghanistan turns its attention to the former Soviet Central Asia, notably to the Islamists of Tajikistan and Chinese Turkestan. Iran, by far the most powerful and most devoted to the cause of Muslim radicalism, not only often foots the bill of their activities, but also convenes meetings of Terrorist International in Teheran in order to strengthen the front of rejection of any reconciliation with the US (and Israel), and to promote subversion of pro-Western regimes in other Muslim countries.

For these fundamentalists, Islam is not *one* of the revealed religions, but the only valid faith which must be imposed upon all of Allah's creatures, peacefully through submission if possible, forcefully through *Jihad* if necessary. Indeed, in spite of the oft-voiced complaint by other Muslims who do not follow this line of logic, that the militants have been "misusing", "abusing" or "manipulating" "*real*" Islam, the worldwide conflicts in the name of Islam, and the visible successes that the Islamists have registered, make the radicals far more credible in the eyes of the Muslim masses than their quietists adversaries. The fervor of *Jihad* is also fueled by the ongoing conflicts within Islamic lands or against them (Bosnia, Kosovo, Israel, Chechnya, Kashmir, Central Asia, the Philippines, the Moluccas, and Chinese Turkestan),

where it is used as a mobilizing and rallying symbol against the perceived non-Muslim occupiers, oppressors, and exploiters.

The Spatial Muslim Upheaval in Asia

Many issues deserve to be tackled in this context which touch upon the sociopolitical complexities governing Muslim existence in Asia. For example, the questions of Islam's encounter with other established religions and the notion of tolerance in a pluralistic society; Muslim majority states (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia) as against Muslim-minorities (in China, Thailand, India, Nepal, etc.); the various Islamic groups which have opted for either the violent quick fix of Islam here and now, versus the long haul re-Islamization by consensual means; the link between democratization and Islamization: are they mutually bearable? What is the source of political legitimacy? Autocratic regimes leaning on the military (Pakistan, Suharto's Indonesia) or Muslim autocracies ruled by *Shari`ah* law (Afghanistan). There is also the great question of whether all these movements are examples of separate and independent local manifestations of Islam, or inter-connected? What is the unifying role of the "Afghans", those volunteer veterans of the Afghan War who returned to their home-countries radicalized and battle-hardened and are now stirring unrest there.

In view of the limited purview of this essay, we will have to skip those major issues and focus mainly on the Muslim upheaval in the Asian space, even though we will be touching upon some of those questions marginally as we proceed. In the Indian subcontinent, it is not only the perennial and much-publicized problem of Kashmir which stands out as an example of Muslim manipulation in a political and military confrontation, but also the equally acute issue of the large Muslim minority in the state of India (over 100 million), and also the upheaval caused by fundamentalist groups in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the threatening proximity of Afghanistan.

The Muslim minority in India is doubly marginalized by the fact that it once belonged and was identified with the ruling splendor of the *Mughal* Empire that is no more, and also by its choice to remain a tolerated population in Hindu India, rather than wander to the newly-established Muslim state of Pakistan when partition became inevitable. Whether they did well to stay in place in their ancestral land and not join the other *Muhajirun* who had hurriedly flocked to Pakistan, remains a matter of divided opinion. Be it as it may, an enormous Muslim community of this size, with its kin across a hostile border, cannot but raise contradictory feelings of loyalty to their country and people at the same time. Occasional eruptions of inter-communal and interfaith strife between the Muslims and the predominant host cultures of India also exacerbate the already precarious balance between the parties.

India's rehabilitation of its relations with the US, and its accelerated economic growth, directly reflect on its tenacity on the Kashmir front, especially in the light of China's indication that it was willing to cooperate with Delhi in problems of separatist forces and terrorism, which in India's Islamic problem are often coterminous. This of course might shift China's regional balance away from Muslim Pakistan and closer to India's Muslim concerns, in spite of Beijing's assurances to the contrary. For the common fear evinced by India and China from restive Muslim minorities (in Kashmir and East Turkestan respectively) might plaster over the suspicions entertained heretofore between them regarding their strategic interests and objectives. At the same time, however, the improving economic and strategic relations between India and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), some of whose membership are Muslim, and which is based on their shared suspicion towards China, might tilt the balance towards collaboration with Muslim countries and get their legitimation

to any firm Indian policy towards its Muslims, rather than throw its lot with the Chinese who oppress their rebellious Muslims in Xinjiang. A step in this direction was done recently when Wahid's Indonesia announced its support of India's policies towards religious fundamentalism and secession.

Democratic and economically and strategically emerging India can become more and more attractive to prospective partners in Southeast Asia and even in China, at a time when Pakistan is unstable, subject to military rule, and viewed as the supporter and sustainer of the troublemaking Muslims of Kashmir. Southeast Asian countries, while edging slowly towards India are also aware of their commonality of interests with Delhi in containing Islamic fundamentalism at home, which not only discredits them in the eyes of the West, due to anti-Christian abuses in East Timor, the Moluccas, Irinjaya, Java proper and the Southern Philippines (see below), but principally due to the destabilizing effect this has had on the domestic politics of the Filipino and Indonesian archipelagoes, at a time when handicapped Wahid's hold on power seemed fragile and uncertain, and ultimately brought his downfall and replacement by Megawati whose fortunes may not be much more enviable, and the vacuum left by the impeached Filipino President is not yet solidly filled in.

In Central and Eastern Asia, the rampages of the *Taliban* in Afghanistan and the unrest of the *Uighurs* in Eastern Turkestan are closely watched by their Asian neighbors not only for their own threatening sake, but mainly because of their radiating onto their own countries. The active support and shelter given to bin Laden by the Kabul regime, until its own recent demise, as well as the ideological and training sustenance they lent to the *Islamikaze* groups currently based there, have turned Central Asia into one of the main centers of Islamic violent radicalism in the world. Moreover, the battle going on in Central Asia, between Turkey and Iran, and Iran and the Arabs, for the souls and future orientation of the populations of those former Soviet republics, has produced some odd bedfellows whose common objective is either to push the entire area to Muslim fundamentalism, Iran and Afghanistan style, or to steer it towards the pro-Western Turkish model. The latter has been fostered by the US, Turkey, Israel, and the former Communist rulers still in place, and aims at economic development, in the erroneous belief that they can thereby scuttle Muslim radicalization.

The emerging paradox is therefore, like in other areas of the Islamic world, that the West and its moderate satellites find themselves supporting the oppressive and undemocratic, but seemingly stable regimes in those countries, for fear that democracy might give rise to Muslim fundamentalism, as the Algerian scenario of 1991-92 has shown. Conversely, support for the existing regimes would, it is hoped, generate the kind of economic growth and prosperity, with Western investment in the energy industry, Israeli investment in advanced agriculture, and Turkish overseeing of the return of the Turkic heritage which would ensure the steady development towards the Ankara model of moderate Islam. It is unclear, however, whether and for how long could this pattern be maintained, in view of the resounding collapse of similar pro-Western models in monarchical Iran in 1979, in Western-supported rebellious Afghanistan in 1996, and the imminent dangers to the same in Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere in the Islamic world.

This Muslim-Turkic unrest extends also into Chinese Turkestan. Indeed since the end of the 1980s, at which time the Chinese regime, under the supreme guidance of Deng Xiaoping, seemed to be relaxing its minority policy so as to make any social unrest unwarranted, that policy opened the door to widespread violence in practically all counties of Xinjiang, the Northwest and the far West of China. Admittedly, some of the violence was triggered by printed insults of the Muslims, but it escalated and got out of hand by the military intervention of the PLA, as in Xining in the Fall of 1993. In some areas, as in Kashgar, *Islamikaze*

bombing was perpetrated (October 1993), and the ominous war cries of *Jihad*, associated with a local "*Hizbullah*" (the Party of Allah) were voiced.

This whole series of manifestations of Muslim violence began in 1989 with what has come to be known as the "Chinese Rushdie Affair", when multitudes of Muslims, first in Beijing and then elsewhere, went out to the streets to demonstrate against the blasphemous depiction of their faith by Chinese writers. Although initially the Beijing demonstrations by representatives of all Muslim "nationalities" were supported and allowed to be reported by the Chinese authorities, they later spilled into Turkestan. By 1990, and certainly thereafter, these sentiments which had at the outset generated demonstrations, were later woven into a powerful fabric of rebellion, supported by cries of, "Free East Turkestan!!" by the Muslim minorities who lived there, notably the *Uighurs*. This uprising was directed against the Chinese authorities and was aided from the outside, mainly by the *Mujahideen* of Afghanistan and the adjoining Kirghiz, Tajik and Kazakh republics. These riots were triggered in an atmosphere which viewed Islam as a victor and Godless Communism as the routed enemy. Once the Soviet Communist giant had foundered, the other Communist superpower, China, was eyed as the next target.

While most of the *Hui*-Muslim minority is widespread over practically all China proper, thus lacking a specific territory it can claim as its own and use as its base, and therefore is wary not to demand secession, Qinghai and Xinjiang, which are closer to the Islamic world and have been drawing support from some of it, have advanced such demands, and violence has been resorted to in pursuance of this goal. Thus, due to both the lax policy of the Chinese government, which permits links and visits between its Muslims and the Muslim world, and the pressing interests of the radical elements in Islamdom, one can expect more and more outbursts of this sort which may culminate, if the circumstances so allow, in concrete demands for outright secession from China, not unlike the process that brought the Soviet Union to its demise. On the other hand, however, in view of the Unitarian concept of government in China, which has never acknowledged the existence of "federated republics" in its midst (like in the Soviet Union), nor tolerated secession (see the unfortunate Tibetan example), it is hard to conceive a China that would sit idly by while its borders are permeated by rebellion and chaos.

Southeast Asia has also been swept in this wave of Muslim fundamentalism of late. In the words of one writer,

> religious divisions based on Islam have exacerbated ethnic differences, and some religiously-oriented groups are engaging in violent and extreme acts that pose a potentially serious long-term threat to stability in the region.[2]

According to Rubenstein and other scholars, the Islamic radicalization that began in the 1980s has migrated from the Middle East to Asia and now poses a challenge to the new leadership of those countries who had theretofore put their emphasis on economic development.

In Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world (some 200 million), while under autocratic Suharto, political Islam was discouraged; in the chaos that reigns since he was removed (1998), there is no telling how the fundamentalists might force their way when the test of power between the various contenders will end by the establishment of a new order. In 1990, Minister Habibie had established under Suharto's aegis, the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) in order to contain Muslim intellectual ferment. This "establishment" organization was, however, criticized by Abdurrahman Wahid, an influential Muslim scholar, then the president of the state.

Since 1996, riots sprung out in rural Indonesia when Muslim crowds began attacking Christian churches, Buddhist temples and property belonging to the Chinese minority. The combination of xenophobia, imported Middle Eastern Muslim radicalism, economic deprivation and the local political autocracy, raised the specter of Muslim fundamentalism as a viable alternative. Indeed, the violent student riots which brought down Suharto in 1998, were regularly dominated by posters invoking the Khomeini revolution in Iran and the success of the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. In effect the general and presidential elections of 1999 were overshadowed by ten different Muslim groups which brandished Muslim symbols such as the *Ka`ba* in Mecca and the Muslim Crescent, though the main struggle for hegemony was waged between the traditional and modern streams of Islam, namely *Nahdatul Ulama* and the *Muhammadiyah,* headed respectively by Wahid and Amien Rais. Wahid emerged as the President due to his alliance with Megawatti Sukarno, and that was also ultimately supported by Rais. This signaled a moderation in the government of Indonesia, and a tolerant and pluralistic policy which veered away from Muslim fundamentalism.

However, the *Aceh* separatists, a fiercely Muslim group in Sumatra who aspire to a Muslim state, and the eruption of Muslim-Christian clashes in the island of Ambon in the Moluccas, have caused thousands of casualties. In addition, militiamen self-styled as "*Jihad* Army", were discovered training around Jakarta, with the intention to join their co-religionists in Ambon.[3] Some of them made it and further fed unrest in that island, while other Muslim radicals, including Rais, proceeded to criticize Wahid for his policies of reconciliation and his moderate policy of openness towards Israel. It is probable that as Wahid leaves or is removed from power, the mounting sounds of Islamic radicalism that he could silence to date, will raise its head once again.

The other major country of the Malay world – Malaysia, has been rocked by both an equally restive Muslim radicalism and an economic crisis which deepened the Muslim sentiment, instigated and led by the opposition PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) which aspires to establish a Muslim state in the country. This movement has its roots in the Malaysian Youth Movement and the *Dakwah* upsurge of the 1970s which had raised Muslim consciousness to become a primary element of Malaysian identity. This forced the government of Mahatir, especially since the co-optation of the Muslim student leader in 1982, Anwar Ibrahim, to adopt a Muslim policy of its own in order not to appear as lagging behind the Muslim opposition. But at the same time, the government banned any manifestations of Muslim radicalism.

The ousting of popular Vice-Premier Ibrahim, who had in the meantime risen through the ranks and threatened Mahatir's primacy, and his trial in 1998, signaled a turning point in the relations between the government and Muslim opposition. The 1999 elections, after Ibrahim's arrest, saw the PAS emerging as the main opposition to Mahatir's government. Mahatir, who stayed in power mainly due to his Chinese partners who are as scared of Islamists in power, turned to crack down on the Muslim radicals whose mounting popularity after Ibrahim's trumped-up conviction began to challenge his hold on power. In the balance is the weakened government's capacity to contain the *Dakwah* and the PAS popular support, which if failed, may throw the country, already plagued by economic difficulties, into instability and chaos, dangerously coming close to Indonesia's Muslim upheaval and Suharto's demise.

The Muslim Rebellions

If the Indonesian and Malaysian governments have been so far holding their ground in their attempt to partly co-opt Islam and partly to clamp down on its most extreme manifestations,

in the countries of Southeast Asia where Islam is in the minority the situation is much more complicated and dangerous due to the protracted armed conflicts involved. We are talking about the decades-long insurgencies in Burma, Thailand and the Philippines. While the two former are Buddhist countries where minority Islam has been out of place and using violence against the best tradition of religious tolerance there, the latter, being Christian, invokes the age-old memories of Christian-Muslim enmity since medieval times to our day. Furthermore, while in the Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, the struggle is mainly about the nature of the regime and the souls of the population, in the Muslim-minority countries, Muslim secession threatens to break away large swaths of territory from the host countries and wreak havoc on the concept of national sovereignty as it is understood there.

Invariably, the Muslim rebellions in those countries erupted in close proximity to Muslim-majority states (Bangladesh and Malaysia) which have served since the onset of these conflagrations as the foci of indoctrination and assistance at the very least, and sometimes as launching pads and countries of refuge in the worst cases. This means that the Muslim minorities in these restive provinces of non-Muslim countries sometimes entertain irredentist claims which are to connect them with the mother countries they aspire to join. It is also noteworthy that since these rebellions are led in well-defined territories where the Muslims predominate, it is relatively easier for them to claim autonomy, independence or secession than if they were spread out and diluted within the majority host countries. Due to their minority status (4-6% in these cases), they cannot entertain any hope of attaining their goal by direct and open military confrontation, hence their resorting to guerilla warfare.

However, while the *Moros* of the Southern Philippines and the *Patani* Muslims in Southern Thailand have been able to connect to the outside Muslim world and elicit support, the *Arakan* Muslims of Burma have been much less capable of doing so. The reason must lie in the fact that the former are Malay, and through Malaysia and Indonesia which are relatively prosperous and high profile, they can get their voices heard in ASEAN, the Islamic Conference and other international forums, while the relatively quiescent and low profile Bangladesh can hardly speak for itself, let alone for the *Arakan* Muslims. Hence also perhaps the differences between the high aspirations of the former for independence/secession and the latter's resignation to autonomy, if that. These differences have also had an impact on the intensity of warfare: the *Moros'* battle, and to a lesser extent the *Patanis'*, has sometimes attained the height of a full-fledged war while the *Arakans* had to confine themselves to much less than that.[4]

Another facet which affects the different levels of intensity of these respective rebellions is the internal divisions within the rebels' ranks and leaderships, which not only tend to blunt the acuity of their messages but also to generate confusion as to their ultimate goals, and to weaken their causes in consequence. In the Philippines, it is the *Moro* Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the *Abu Sayyaf* (ominously meaning the "Father of the Sword") group which are currently locked in a bitter armed struggle against the government. The older *Moro* National Liberation Front (MNLF), led by Nur Misuari, had signed peace with Manila, which was squarely rejected by the other more militant organizations. These latter groups, who have also indulged in plain terrorism, kidnappings and hostage-taking of foreigners, are aided by such militant regimes as Kabul's in terms of weapons, funds, training, and moral and doctrinal support. Both militant groups speak in terms of *Jihad* with a view to establish a fully independent *Shari`ah* state over *Moro* lands. The *Abu Sayyaf* group, though much smaller than the MILF, also espouses the use of violence against the Christians of Mindanao in order to intimidate them and extirpate them from their domain, and later bring about universal Islamic hegemony.

In Thailand, it is the Malay-Muslim population of the South that has been throwing that border area into chaos since the 1960s, under various names, titles, leaderships and organizations, but all aspiring to a Muslim state around the *Patani*s, with or without ultimate attachment to neighboring Malaysia. Contrary to the Philippines where moderate concessions by the government at least pacified the *Misuari* faction while incensing the others to more extremism, here all moves of the Thai government towards reconciliation have failed to date to erode the secessionist import of the rebellion, right into the new century and millennium. In the late 1990s, the *Mahatir* government in Malaysia, itself threatened by fundamentalist fervor at home, collaborated in arresting *Patani* leaders who sought refuge in his country, and that seemed to allay the Thai government's fears about the persistence of the crisis.

The Thai authorities, however, like other governments who suffer from Muslim insurgency, also miscalculated by assuming that economic development might lure the rebels away from warfare. This same logic which has been voiced in many Western milieus, and wrongly equaled Muslim fundamentalism with poverty and underdevelopment, not only has proved wrong in practice (Iran and Saudi Arabia are rich and fundamentalist at the same time), but it is also deemed patronizing and therefore it is rejected by the Islamists. It is refuted because it erroneously predicates that for a handful of dollars, Muslim radicals would forego their ideological fervor and their warring commitment. In any case, the Thai government, like the Egyptian and Jordanian authorities, have stepped up their large scale campaign of repression, which has shown some promising signs of pacifying the terrain, but no one knows for how long.

The rebellion in Burmese Arakan has adopted the much more modest goal of simply attaining freedom of worship within the otherwise oppressive – for all regimes that have led Burma since the death of U Nu in the 1960s. The *Rohingya* Muslims in question therefore never reached the levels of violence or hope attained by the *Moros* or the *Patanis*. To be sure, the *Arakan Mujahideen* at first put the Burmese authorities to the test by engaging in rebellion, but after they were ruthlessly quelled, they retreated into petty border skirmishes on the Bangladesh boundary area, or resorted to faint diplomatic moves seeking to enlist the favors of the international community or the bargaining positions of the Muslim world. Some of the rebels have surrendered in exchange for land or cash grants, or copies of the *Qur`an*, but those do not seem to have made a significant dent in the zeal of the rebellious mainstream.

Consequences

Contrary to what some experts in the West thought, or are still maintaining, the Islamic fundamentalist wave which has swept the world, including Asia, while it may have peaked is far from showing signs of recession. Naturally, each individual Muslim rebellion or discontent may show temporary signs of retreat due to exhaustion, lack of funds, isolation, resolute oppression, or disregard by the outside world, but the general trend is yet to peter out. As against the partial settlement between the Filipino government and the *Moros* of Misuari, for example, *Abu Sayyaf* has emerged, perhaps as a sign of despair, but also as a sure manifestation or more violence, extremism, zeal and cruelty. Similarly, the fast growing Muslim demography in Asia, manifested in both their relative and absolute numbers within their majority countries or as minorities within other host cultures, can only generate more and more confrontations in the years to come between those minorities who are vying for independence, autonomy or secession, and their authorities who dread such prospects.

Asian Islam has been traditionally much more quiescent than in the core area of the Middle East, not only in the countries where it constitutes the minority but also in the areas where its

hundreds of millions have long ago shifted the demographic center of gravity of Islam from the Middle East eastwards. Naturally, eruptions of militant Islam have plagued modern Asian history, as seen in 19th century India and China and in other rebellions in Southeast Asia. But those were all local or regional manifestations of unrest that were dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and were brought to their end by oppression (China) or partition (India), or continue to fester (Kashmir and Xinjiang). What characterizes the contemporary eruptions of Muslim fundamentalism in Asia and elsewhere is not only their virulence and seemingly uncompromising platforms, but mainly their instant worldwide reverberations and the international involvement in their cultivation or denouement. This is due to the internationalization of the Muslim rebellions themselves either through the direct imprint of countries such as Iran and Afghanistan which lend assistance to them, or to the context of terrorism (like hostage taking, drug trade or violence against Western interests) which dramatizes and raises international interest as the events unfold.

Whether Asian Muslims can or will revert to their traditional stand of moderation and preference for economic pursuit, or will be further drawn down the abyss of unflinching radicalism *Hizbullah*-style, only time will tell. There are indications both ways: as against President Wahid's inclusive and tolerant style of responsible leadership in Indonesia, which did not hold for long, there are more militant groups that breath down the neck of his successor, and many of them may cause upheaval now that he is removed from power. Similarly, as against the virulent Muslim separatist movements in Chinese Turkestan, the Philippines and Thailand that emulate the models of Central Asia and the Caucasus, there is the overwhelming presence of those respective national states which will not allow secession to tear them apart and set precedents for further national disintegration.

It remains very doubtful however that this current wave of radical Islam in Asia can be laid to rest before the ripples of the much more significant fundamentalist current of the core lands of Islam can be quieted and dissipated.

Endnotes

[1] The term was coined by this author in his article "*Islamikaze* and Their Significance", *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence,* January 1997, signifying that the so-called "suicide bombers" developed by Muslim fundamentalists, are not really bent of self-immolation as suicidal types would, but rather on the elimination of the enemy amidst self-sacrifice if necessary, something that brings them typologically close to the Japanese Kamikaze of the WWII Pacific War.

[2] Colin Rubenstein, JCPA Jerusalem Letter No. 436, August 15, 2000.

[3] Ibid.

[4] M. Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, Lexington Books, forthcoming.