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# RADICAL ISLAM AND THE IMPERIALIST ONSLAUGHT

Kumar David

Old style imperialism dominated by finance capital and post-World War II neo-imperialism founded on pax-America have both to a degree been replaced by a new phase of world capitalism known as globalisation. There is, however, one part of the globe where neo-imperialism is very much alive and this is the Middle East. There are special reasons for this—Israel and oil, or perhaps more accurately, oil first and secondly the grave regional tensions arising from the creation of the state of Israel and its subsequent sustenance in a special relationship with the United States. Although historians may discover interesting roots reaching into earlier times the political fundamentals in the Middle East are driven by these two post-war determinants.

One of the most significant consequences of the peculiar combination of these two factors is the emergence of radical Islam as the principal anti-imperialist force on a regional, if not global, scale. There is in truth nothing standing in the way of rampant American imperial global hegemony, at this moment in time, except radical Islam and its ability to mobilise greater Islam behind it. The term 'radical Islam' is not used here to indicate armed Islamic movements nor fundamentalist currents although it certainly includes the former and a varying cluster of the latter who drift in and out of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles. As an example of this last named vacillation consider the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran after the fall of the Shah. The term radical Islam is used in this document to include, and to forcefully denote, a broad current of Arab, Persian, Berber and North African and Asian (mainly Indonesian and Filipino) mass movements composed of alliances of subaltern classes as well as militant organisations driven by deep social contradictions. While the rise of radical Islam in far-flung parts of the world cannot be explained simply in terms of events in the Middle East alone, nevertheless, oil and America's oppressive client states in the region remain the core issues.

The term greater Islam is used in this article to denote the much broader compendium of religious, cultural and political organisations that bind an Islamic population together on a national and to a degree international scale. What we exclude from the definition of greater Islam, in this paper, is the state itself and the feudal, conservative or indeed modern capitalist (vide Mahathir) political elite in control of the state. The reason for this rather careful definition of categories is to obtain a clearer description of the forces that are likely to be mobilised by radical Islam as it prepares to face a global American threat.

This article will not attempt to recall the post war history of the Middle East culminating in the rise of radical Islam and Islamic

fundamentalism since there are many good studies available and numerous excellent summary articles have appeared recently in the press and on websites recently. The mention of a few names and dates is adequate. The almost unending massacre in Palestine, Mosadegh in the early 1950s in Iran, Nasser the Suez and three wars, the Bathist uprisings and regimes in Syria and Iraq, the near destruction of Lebanon in the 1970s, Sabra and Shatila in 1982, the *intifada*, and much more, but enough. This hellish history has created its own radical and militant organisations; oil and Israel bind America deeply to the region; in consequence Islam and the relationship of radical Islam to America has become the core political issue of our times. In this incendiary crucible the rise of radical fighting mass movements as well as terrorist entities was inevitable, equally inevitable that Islam would stand at the ideological core of these organisations. At this particular moment of writing (Sept. 2001) radical Islam stands as the only force that has the gall, the ideology, the determination and the ability to stand and fight American global economic, political and military hegemony on a world scale.

The relationship of radical Islam to greater Islam is a fluctuating one; its relationship to fundamentalism an overlapping one. A defiant Afghanistan has generated waves of support everywhere in the greater Islamic world, forcing even the most reactionary Islamic powers such as the Saudi rulers on the back foot for fear of a backlash. The Pakistani military rulers live in fear of being overthrown by mass opposition if they are seen as stooges of an anti-Islamic America. The huge Muslim religious and civilian organisations in Indonesia have placed Megawathi's grip on power on a knife-edge in the event that hostilities in Afghanistan become protracted. At this time of writing (late September 2001) it is not possible to forecast how the war will develop. This, of course, depends on too many imponderables that least of all the American ruling class can foresee, and on the contest between long-term strategic and long-term business objectives that this class is now struggling to balance. It is possible, however, to tentatively foresee, that radical Islam will become greatly strengthened in the coming years and be able to drag greater Islamic mass movements and even some governments in Islamic countries along with it. Economic marginalisation of the majority of the population in the wake of capitalist globalisation and widespread political oppression has pushed the mass of the people to the wall. A left movement of the type familiar in other parts of Asia failed to take deep root in these countries. Radical Islamic, militant Palestinian and similar movements emerged to fill the vacuum and take leadership in the daily struggles of the landless, the homeless, the bombed out, and other oppressed sections of society.

It can be cautiously forecast that America's power in the Middle East will be more and more seriously contested and its role diminished in the coming years. Even a scenario that credits the American and British governments with the strategic ability to avoid a prolonged war which in a long-term geopolitical sense will result in a net loss of their power, still implies compromises which will diminish their influence. The writing is on the wall for America, in the long run, whatever military blows it inflicts on Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and elsewhere in the immediate months ahead. Radicalisation of Middle Eastern and sub-continental politics is now unavoidable in the coming years. It is against this background that the left in these countries and regions, and indeed worldwide, must rethink its options.

The left, traditional, new, marxist or democratic, is nowhere near influential enough to play a global role comparable in importance to these radical mass movements in containing the current ambitions of American imperialism. The working class in the West is splintered and lacks political direction and material cohesion. The new stage of world capitalism is a historic crisis of overproduction overshadowing all previous crises of overproduction. The rise of productivity, automation and a knowledge-based economy is making the category labour itself increasingly redundant. Unemployment, underemployment, part-time employment and exclusion from the very process of social production portend what has been called a 'world without work'. The nightmare that Marx foresaw is finally coming to us as the gift of the third industrial revolution. For this, and for other more immediate reasons, the traditional forces that could have been mobilised to forestall imperialism's colossal military, diplomatic and media offensive are no longer in the vanguard. Maybe only socialism, not radical Islam, can save us from eventual barbarism, but in the meantime we need to seek out our allies now, not in the next world.

It should be clear by now what thesis this document is building up to. Socialists and marxists have not been shy in the past to form alliances with national liberation movements, armed and unarmed struggles of national minorities and anti-imperialist entities even when their ideologies contained elements that, in our view were limited, backward, primitive or to a degree reactionary. For example, however unwilling to endorse some animistic or "primitive" ideology, we have not hesitated to throw our support behind anti-colonial struggles of simple communities or tribal

peoples determined to keep their lands and their societies free from colonial plunder. The issue now is the need for a new global alliance, an alliance that must be formed with radical Islamic and populist movements; a force that has the credible ability to hold the line against the advancing global hegemon. The issue is not new, only the scale and implication is bigger. It is time to work out the parameters along which we will form an alliance in struggle with radical Islam. And we had better do it before American neo-imperialism sinks and silences us all.

The absolutely essential parameter to work out is how we deal with the deep ideological divide that separates socialists from the ideology (ideologies) of the various radical Islamic currents. The community-oriented traditions of sharing, support and responsibility of the basic Islamic code, originating in the needs of the early societies, actually provide a useful point of connection. Today crushed by modern capitalism the subaltern classes led by radical Islam see these support mechanisms in the way that the working class we hope sees socialism at the level of community life. The vision of decentralised self-governing communities is a healthy alternative to creeping global control of society by big business and the big state. It is not incompatible with advanced technology or economies of scale in socially rational production.

Therefore the problem lies not here but elsewhere. The issues of concern are the place of women in society, the form of the state (theocratic or secular) and notions of personal liberty. The last named not merely in its truncated bourgeois form of political-man but rather the enjoyment of the multifaceted opportunities that modernisation has made possible. Fundamentalist ideology poses an obstacle to both political democracy in its limited bourgeois sense and, because of its philosophical obscurantism, to the fuller freedoms and free associations that the technical and material advancement of the last three centuries have made possible. Both the Enlightenment project and the achievements of Newtonian mechanics constitute the divide.

There is however a difference of time scales that resolves the essence of this dichotomy. The alliance is a matter of urgency, the critical distance to maintain is a matter of measured consideration. This resolution of the difficulty is the way forward to practical action at the present time. ■

**Dr. Kumar David teaches at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.**