

**WESTERN IMPERIALISM  
AND ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM:  
what relation?**

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Evaluating Islamic fundamentalism: different dominant views:

- \* crazy, jealousy, 'fascist'?
- \* cultural identity in face of West?
- \* legitimate challenge to Western power?

My argument:

- \* West's role in the greater Middle East since 19C => rational anti-westernism

...but has taken different forms -

- \* Secular nationalism dominant 1920s –1970s

\* Secular nationalism declines under internal and external pressures

\* Rise of Islamic fundamentalism

- different classes and nation states which support it

- its political methods

\* My political conclusions.

## **ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM**

1 bn Muslims, from Morocco to Indonesia, from Central Asia to West Africa.

1300 year history of Islam and Islamic societies

=> vast variety of ideologies and practices historically and now.

Subject here = very specific political movement of last 30 years or so; call here 'Islamic fundamentalism' (IF) =

- \* anti-modernism: against freedom of thought, civil liberties, secular state; against some science; specifically –
- \* states should adopt Sharia law
- \* ancient rules of gender and sexuality
- \* against West *as* exporter of modernism
- \* against left and ‘Communism’
- \* violence against opponents, including civilians (‘terrorism’).

Current presence:

- Iranian state, Palestinian Authority, Afghanistan 1996-2001
- large opposition movements in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, Somalia....
- clandestine armed groups.

# WESTERN IMPERIALISM AND THE ANTI-WESTERN REACTION

## 1. *Direct* western military/political control + rivalry of Western powers

Formal colonies 18C on:-

- French in N Africa
- Brits in India, Aden,
- Russia in C.Asia

=> rivalries e.g. Afghan War of 1850s

Informally since 19C: British in Egypt, M.E.

1918: Defeat and dismemberment of Ottoman Empire => Britain and France control M.E.

- *create* states of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi, Jordan, Iraq

US since SWW:-

\* Creation of Israel as US client;

## \* 'Cold' War v Soviet Union

- US bases in M.E., Turkey in NATO;
- Pakistan v 'Russia's India'
- Afghanistan in 1970/80s aimed to *draw in* USSR ('Create Russia's Vietnam').

## **2. Securing economic interests of Western capital**

Suez canal: 1956 invasion by Brits and French.

### **Oil!**

Ensuring adequate supply

British and US oil companies' ownership from early 20C

e.g. CIA, MI6 overthrow of Mossadeq in Iran, 1953 => re-privatisation of AIOC/ BP

- State Dept memo: 'The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and the British are genuinely hated in Iran'.

### **3. Instal and support client states**

Mostly dictatorships

Either secular or Islamic (plus Israel)

West defends *ethnic* policies of these states:  
Israel, Turkey, Iraq.

#### **Results**

\* Popular anti-westernism.

\* Capitalist economies of the region:

Oil producers with very small population  
(Saudi, Gulf Emirates): Rulers syphon off  
proceeds

Rest: Poor (with oil) or very poor (without  
oil).

# **OPPOSITION TYPE 1: POPULIST NATIONALISM**

## **\* Parties/ movements/ cultures**

Modernisation: economic and technical development; education and welfare

Democratic rights

Secular

include Communist Parties.

## **\* States**

‘Internal development’ strategy in Third World generally: economic nationalism *versus* imperial domination.

Big economic role of state

e.g. Ataturk in Turkey  
Nehru/Congress Party in India  
Nasser in Egypt  
Baath in Syria and Iraq  
Mossadeq in Iran  
FLN in Algeria  
Sukarno in Indonesia

Support from USSR.

Pan-Arabism.

## **DECLINE OF SECULAR NATIONALISM**

### **\* Internal contradictions**

Subordinate capitalism

Limited internal markets, technologies, capital

State officials enrich selves, operate  
dictatorships

=> increasing popular opposition, economic  
and political.

## **\* External pressures from West**

Boycott by western companies and banks  
(except oil)

Pressure from IMF and World Bank to open  
up to –

- western investment and ownership
- serving western markets by export.

Military action v secular nationalists: -

- Iran 1953

- 1967: Israel invasion of West Bank and  
Gaza, subsequently S. Lebanon => weakens  
secular PLO, strengthens Hezbollah.

- Iraq 1991, 2003.

All => weakening secular nationalism, rise of  
alternative anti-westernism.

## **OPPOSITION TYPE 2: ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM**

Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, 1930s: against British

Huge rise rise 1970s (cf Hindu and Christian fundamentalism). In opposition to –

- Western presence
- Israeli state
- Shah of Iran => 1981- Islamic government
- Secular states in Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan etc...
- Afghanistan 1970s secular leftist regime => 1989- Taliban insurgency.

**Who supports?**

**\* The poor**

Church is able to operate under dictatorships

Appeal for poor:-

(a) progressive

IF groups provide welfare services *versus* secular state's failures.

(b) conservative/ reactionary

Against unpleasant modern reality, hold onto a (mythical) good life

- male power.

Conservative version links to -

**\* Sections of the 'middle class'**

- mullahs (Iran...)
- traditional petit bourgeoisie (the bazaar)
- tribal chiefs (e.g. in Afghanistan)

Social position challenged by industrialism, urbanism, modernism =>

*anti-modernist* ideology, in anti-western garb.  
Not against markets and capitalism, but  
against some of their *effects*.

**\* Nation states of the region**

Not only Iran, *but also pro-western states*:  
Saudis, Gulf states,  
some governments of Pakistan and Turkey.

Promote IF because -

- Islam used to control population
- against left, 'communists'
- reinforces divisions within population =  
divide and rule

E.g. -

- Saudi promotion of Wahhabism
- Moslems v Hindus throughout sub-continent
- Pakistan support for Afghan Mujahedeen,  
Taliban.
- Intra-Islamic rivalries: Sunni v Shia in Iraq

## Al Qaida

- emerged from Saudi madrassas
- financed by Saudi elite \$ millions.

### **\* Western powers!**

Because IF is anti-left.

e.g. US/UK support for Saudi, Pakistan dictatorships

e.g. US support for IF s in Afghanistan:

- \* After 1973 secular coup v King – early 1990s: US/Pakistan support Mujahedeen
- against secular nationalist regime
- against Soviet Union

\* early 1990s – 1996: support and build Taliban and al Qaida, to unify the country and consolidate the anti-left regime.

=> Taliban, al Qaida = West's Frankenstein?.

## Hence: **Ambiguity of IF:**

- expresses different political projects and class interests
- more anti-modernist than anti-imperialist.

## **Why does IF use violence against civilians?**

Many anti-western movements in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world use –

- mass organisation of population
- appeal for support to populations in the West.

IF seldom uses mass mobilisations because -

- within the region would frighten middle class/ upper class/ State backers
  - within western countries impossible to seek support because religious specificity and lack universal popular programme
- + IF has no respect for freedom of debate.

Therefore terrorism = a political *gesture*.

Terrorism *legitimated* by Western terrorism in the region over a long period.

## MY CONCLUSIONS

Oppose IF programme because -

\* Oppose terrorist methods as -

- can't work
- unleashes US war
- gives all states in region *and* in West excuse to destroy civil rights => directed at liberals and left.

Terrorism *always* plays into hands of states.

\* Reactionary policies towards women, sexual freedom

\* No useful economic programme for majority in Middle East or elsewhere.

*But* appreciate good reasons for anti-Westernism:

- Western political/military control, current wars
- economic exploitation
- support for dictatorships.

=> Support organisations in Middle East fighting for –

- basic human rights
- public services and welfare
- economic programme for benefit of the majority.