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Three discourses on Political Islam in the Middle East

- Debate - Marxism and Religion -

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It was a Russian Jew who set communism on foot in Egypt but his efforts were assisted by the British General Staff Intelligence Department which succeeded in 1919 in obtaining from the grand mufti, Shaikh Muhammad Bakhit, a fatwa against Bolshevism. The effect was directly contrary to what it had anticipated. Some newspapers attacked the fatwa and defended the Bolsheviks.

Many discourses have emerged with regard to the phenomenal rise of political Islam, also referred to as Islamic fundamentalism, or integrisme in French. These discourses, however, are often found lacking when it comes to the political economy of 'Islamism' and consequences of successful takeover of state power (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan) by Islamists. Either the collusion between imperialism and fundamentalism is stressed, though justifiably, or the failure of Arab nationalists/left is pointed out in such discourses.

Chomsky, for instance, in a dialogue with Lebanese intellectual Gilbert Achcar calls political Islam 'mainly a reaction to forces of unrest in the world'. With regard to 'main source of unrest in today's world', Achcar and Chomsky emphasise 'it's the behavior of the US government' (Chomsky and Achcar 2007: 27). Many on the left emphasize the same point.

However, unlike Chomsky and Achcar, this line of argument---popular among left circles--- does not explain the fundamentalists' inability to outdo progressives in the 1950s and 1960s as 'forces of unrest' were even active in the Middle East back then. But most importantly, it implies as if al-Qaida will lay down arms once 'forces of unrest' cease spreading unrest. Islamists want to pursue their Jihadist agenda till the Judgement Day whether there are any forces spreading unrest or not.

In recent years Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis has been most often applied by the right-wing mainly, to political Islam in the Middle East. But long before Huntington, Bernard Lewis in 1964 was arguing that Arab hostility to Washington was not due to US' association with Zionism. He thought Soviet Union escaped this hostility despite her support to the creation of Israel. Lewis thought a better explanation could be found "if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between the states or nations, but as a clash between civilisations. The 'Great Debate', as Gibbon called it, between Christendom and Islam has been going on, in one form or another, since the Middle Ages" (Yaqub 2004: 9).

Samuel P. Huntington amplified 'clash of civilisations' phrase in an article for Foreign Policy while spectacular emergence of bin Laden has reinforced this thesis. According to Yaqub, 'problem with the "clash of civilizations" thesis... lies in its glib dismissal of precisely those concrete grievances. For Arab nationalists during the Cold War (and for Islamists more recently), opposition to Zionism and Western imperialism was a genuine cause of anti-U.S. sentiment, not merely a cover for deeper antipathies" (Yaqub 2004: 9-10).

Halliday attributes the rise of Political Islam to 'the character of states'. He thinks in countries such as Iran, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, political Islam 'has taken the form of a revolt against the state' and a 'strong modernising state has been challenged by movements of social and political opposition' However, al-Qaida 'has arisen and been sustained in countries with very weak states'. He cites Afghanistan and the larger northern part of Yemen as two such examples. 'In such cases it was not revolt against a modernizing state but rather the historical absence of a state' (Halliday 2002a: 41).

Of late, Pakistan has become a sanctuary for al-Qaida where 'historical absence of state' cannot be justified. Also,

under the communists, writ of state was established almost all over Afghanistan despite U.S. intervention. In case of both Afghanistan and Yemen, one sees fall of left government coinciding with rise of fundamentalists and an aggressive foreign intervention. And appeasement of fundamentalists. Also, mere the absence of state does not explain the whole problem unless we analyse the alternative societies, built by fundamentalists, providing social services which in fact should be state's responsibility.

Barber points to a global condition that increasingly will constitute 'one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and Commerce'. And to which only effective form of resistance has thus far been austere, pre-modern ethos of the Jihadists, who have acquired growing influence among Muslims worldwide (Barber 2000:21-6).

Barber may sound fashionable but Middle East has been penetrated by the forces of imperialist globalisation for over a century. Barber's thesis does not explain why only last three decades have seen rise of religious right, not merely in Middle East but in the heart of globalisation itself, the USA, Christian right has emerged with a bang.

However, to avoid Tristram Shandy of a discussion in which hero of the book is not born until half-way through the book, let us first define the term political Islam.

Understanding political Islam

By definition, 'fundamentalism implies a return to Islamic roots, which in, some cases, means a challenge to centuries of scholarly interpretation of those sources' (Ciment 1997:62).

Achcar, who prefers the term 'fundamentalism' says the term "fundamentalism" generally points not only to the literal interpretation of religious scriptures but also to the desire of imposing it on society and government, and everyone abide by these rules... it's a global phenomenon, not something related to Islam alone. Jewish fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, Catholic, Protestant, etc' (Chomsky and Achcar 2007: 34). Halliday thinks that 'fundamentalist' may be partly understood by looking at its opposite, i.e. 'modernist' (Halliday 2002a:53).

It is in view of these definitions one can understand three narratives developed below. The case of Saudi Arabia, modern-era's first fundamentalist state, personifies all these narratives.

1. Imperialism is the mother of fundamentalism

On 5 January 1957, U.S. president Eisenhower asked the Congress for a resolution authorising him to pledge increased military and economic aid, even direct US protection, to any Gulf nation willing to acknowledge the communist threat. Two months later, Congress passed the resolution universally known as Eisenhower Doctrine. The Doctrine was, in fact, aimed at Arab nationalism as much" (Yaqub 2004:1-2). To save Middle East from communism, Washington turned to political Islam.

To check any movement in this direction Washington explored the possibilities of building up King Saud as a counter weight to Nasser. The king was a logical choice owing to his anti-communism. Saud obliged too. He visited Iraq. Both monarchs agreed to forget past enmities against Nasser (Madawi 2002:116). When he visited the USA, in January 1957, Eisenhower departed from normal custom by going to airport to receive Saud. On his return, Saud extended rent-free lease of Dhahran base for another five years (Halliday 2002b:54). US' courting of political Islam against Bolshevism was in line with preceding British colonialism.

It was a Russian Jew, Joseph Rosenthal who set communism on foot in Egypt but his efforts were assisted by the British General Staff Intelligence Department which succeeded in August 1919 in obtaining from the grand mufti, Shaikh Muhammad Bakhit, a fatwa against Bolshevism. The effect was directly contrary to what it had anticipated. Some newspapers, like the *Ahali*, a mouthpiece of the Fabian Salamah Musa, and the nationalist Wadi-en-Nil, attacked the fatwa and defended the Bolsheviks (Batatu 2004:374-377).

Similarly, in Iraq during the unsettled years after the Wathbah of 1948 and the Intifada of 1952, when Iraqi Communist Party emerged as a mass party, religion was invoked to stem the advance of communism. Significantly the initiative came from the representatives of English power. "Communism", wrote an intelligence officer, in a letter to Iraq's secret police dated April 20, 1949, "will never be completely eradicated by what we may term 'police methods' alone". Among the 'corrective' methods recommended by Ray was what he called 'the religious approach.'

Apparently in the pursuit of this line -on October 6, 1953 – Sir John Troutbeck, the English ambassador to Iraq, made direct contact with the chief Mujtahid, Kashif ul-Ghata. The ambassador impressed upon the shaikh that "the combating of communism is dependent upon the awakening of the ulama and the spiritual leaders" (Batatu 2004: 694).

Eisenhower's doctrine was put to test in Jordan first where nationalists were brutally crushed, with Muslim Brothers on monarchy's side, by Shah Hussain. Ever since, civil liberties have been curtailed in Jordan. Eisenhower, however, applauded at the time Hussain's "gallant fight to eject subversive elements from his country and government" (Yaqub 2004: 135).

Earlier, in 1951 the Iranian parliament had voted to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Shortly afterwards, Mohammad Mosadeq, main architect of nationalisation was elected prime minister. Eisenhower administration was suspicious of Mosadeq's ties to Moscow. Hence, he was overthrown in a coup staged by CIA (Yaqub 2004: 29-30).

As usual, Ayotollah Kashani was siding with coup plotters. For his services, the CIA operative in Iran dispatched \$10,000 to Ayotollah (Kinzer 2003:157-178).

These historical references will help, at least partly, explain how imperialism fathered Hamas, Hezbollah, Mehdi Militia, al-Qaida and Iranian Ayatollahs. Edward Said, for instance, points out: "The only Palestinian university not established with Palestinian funds is Gaza's Islamic (Hamas) University, started by Israel, to undermine the PLO during the Intifada." (Said 1997, p xxxix).

Yasser Arafat once affirmed, "Hamas is a creature of Israel which at the time of Prime Minister [Yitzhak] Shamir gave it money and more than 700 institutions among them schools, universities and mosques" (Napoleoni 2003:70).

Hizbollah's rise is often attributed to Iran. An equally important fact is that Israel, according to Achcar, "very deliberately disarmed all groups that were based on secular ideologies with a multireligious membership – communist or nationalist or other. And they didn't disarm communalist groups, whether Shiite or Druze, not to mention their Christian allies" (Chomsky and Achcar 2007:29).

The case of al-Qaida is too known to deserve space here. A symbiosis of US-Saudi-Pakistani spy agencies, al-Qaida was armed, trained and funded to counter Red Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

2. Colonels and communists

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In the 1950s, Middle East had been convulsed by Arab nationalism and communism. Aided by communists, nationalists tasted their first victory in Egypt. On 23 July 1952, Free Officers seized control of the government in a nearly bloodless coup. Monarchy was abolished. They promised to stamp out corruption, compel Britain to withdraw from Egypt, and restore nation's dignity. Muhammad Naguib was the official leader but real power rested with Colonel Gamal Nasser. Truman administration was enthusiastic about the change thinking the new government would not whip up anti-British sentiment in the region. In late 1954, Nasser emerged as public leader and his Pan-Arab philosophy (anti Zionism, anti imperialism, social justice and neutrality) took final shape by 1956 (Yaqub 2004:26-34). He introduced land reforms, built union with Syria in 1958 and lent initial support to Iraqi revolution in 1958 (Ali 2002, p 95-107) where the receipts from oil, 1941-1958, had greatly added to the financial power of the Iraqi state. In consequence, the state became in large measure economically autonomous from society enhancing its potential for despotism. Simultaneously, oil royalties made the state dangerously dependent on oil companies (Batatu 2004: 34).

In the 1940s, communism became a factor in the life of Iraq. Even the right-wing Independence parties in the 1950s grumbled in a Marxist way (Batatu 2004: 465-466).

On 14 July 1958, the Free Officers, led by Qasem, seized power and declared Iraq a republic. Soon after the revolution, factional fight and a propaganda war against Cairo broke out. Nasserites led by Abdul Salam Aref, attempted a coup. Pro-Qasem troops, aided by communists, defeated the coup. In October, Bathists attempted to assassinate Qasem (Ali 2004:71-80). Qasem, now dependent on communists, went for some socio-economic reforms nonetheless.

Land reforms were introduced (1959 -61), restricting the ownership (56 % land was owned by 3,000 landlords). Tax on rich was hiked (40% to 60 %) on incomes above 20,000 dinars. Death duties and inheritance taxes were introduced. Rent-controls were introduced. Working hours were regulated. A ten-thousand housing project was introduced in Baghdad (later named as Saddam City). In 1963, Aref and Bathists captured power in a coup. Qasem was executed. In collaboration with CIA, Bathists vilified and killed many communists (Ali 2004:82-88).

Bath was ditched by Salam but they regained power in a coup in 1968. By that time, Bath in Syria had already consolidated itself in the power. However, in Syria, Bath factions kept fighting each other until in November 1970, Asad took control of Syria which made Bath founder Michel Aflaq flee the country (Ali 2004:109-110). Bath as a secular, nationalist party was founded in 1943 by Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar, both Syrians (Ali 2002:111).

On coming to power, Iraqi Bath repressed communists, Shia, Kurds and every possible opposition. In 1990, Bathist Iraq invaded another neighbouring country, Kuwait, leading to UN sanctions which crippled Iraqi economy. In fact, war with Iran in 1980s had already broken Iraqi economy (Ali 2004:103-143).

Bath rule proved a nightmare for Arabs of Iraq. In post-Saddam period, when elections were held, Shia fundamentalists easily won the elections as Saddam had rooted out every secular opposition. Mosque was the only centre available for clandestine activity. Bath proved incapable of uniting Iraq and Syria. Hence, their Arab nationalism was hardly credible (Ali 2004:112).

The case of Iraq is not different from Egypt, or any other Arab country, where nationalists seized power. In Feb 1958, Syria and Egypt announced federation. Yemen and Lebanon also showed interest to join. But the federation came to an end abruptly (Ali 2002:106-112) shattering nationalist dream of Arab unity. As regards land reforms, in 1952, some measures were announced. Ownership was restricted to 300 feddans. Ten years down the line, only two million peasants had benefitted as only 10 % of the expropriated land could be distributed. As far as workers were concerned, the repression of strikes in 1952 had set the course in 1952. Long before Syed Qutab, two trade union leaders were hanged (in 1952) for organising strike (Ali 2002: 96).

However, it was suicidal involvement in Yemen, against Saudi Arabia, which greatly contributed to Egypt's defeat in 1967 blitzkrieg with Israel and delivered a final blow to Nasserite politics.

With Nasser's death, Anwar Sadaat came to power who in turn, after his assassination, was succeeded by Hosni Mubarak. Though Nasser-era's reforms were rolled back yet the democratic liberties snatched by Nasser are yet to be restored.

What Batatu (2004:461) observed about Iraqi nationalists, holds true for them across Middle East:

"By withholding from the people their constitutional right to organize themselves in parties and trade unions, it took the heart out of the national movement. You cannot grapple with the mightiest empire in the world by ignoring the power of the masses".

3. Jihad by petro-dollars

According to Napoleoni, "Islamic organisations, many of which are linked to armed groups, can draw from a pool of money ranging from \$ 5 billion to \$ 16 billion, the Saudi government alone donates \$ 10 billion via the ministry of Religious Works every year" (Napoleoni 2003:123).

Saudi financing goes much beyond Middle East. For instance, in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), a major beneficiary of Saudi largesse, "runs a huge network of social services, including 20 Islamic institutions, 140 secondary schools, eight madrassas and a \$ 300, 000-plus medical mission that includes mobile clinics, ambulance service and blood bank" (Mir:147). The LeT headquarters, built at the cost of Rs. 50 million, houses "a garment factory, an iron-foundry, a wood-works factory, a swimming pool and three residential colonies" (Mir:147). Who has foot the bill? The LeT chief says a "Saudi trader, Ahmed, contributed Rs. 10 million" while "another Saudi Sheikh, donated more millions for the construction of Dawa Model school" at LeT headquarters (Mir:148).

About Saudi regime, Hiro informs: "Its huge financial backing to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Marxist regime in Kabul is universally known. What is not known widely is its cash subsidies to right-wing groups in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Maldives Islands. For many years it financed the Eritrean insurgents against the Marxist regime in Ethiopia. And in non-Arab Africa Saudi funds went to Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Uganda. In Central America, it funded the anti-leftist Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua" (Hiro 2002:147).

Saudis are not alone in sustaining Islamist groups. Iran's support for Hezbollah has been reported in media. The oil-rich Sheikdom, Kuwait, only in 1990 contributed \$ 60 million to Hamas kitty, at a time when Hamas was being pampered to counter PLO (Kepel 2000:157). Hamas has benefited from Saudi generosity as well as from Iran. According to Napoleoni: "Hamas budget in the occupied territories is estimated at \$ 70 million, of which about 85 percent comes from abroad, the rest is raised among Palestinians in the occupied territories. Though it still receives about \$20-30 million a year from Iran and various ad hoc donations from Saudi Arabia (in April 2002 a telethon in Saudi Arabia raised \$ 150 million for the Palestinians under siege in the occupied territories), more and more money is raised through Palestinians expatriates, private donors in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Gulf states.

In 1998, after being freed by the Israelis, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, set off on a four-month tour of Arab capitals. He was welcomed as a hero and collected donations over \$ 300 million" (Napoleoni 2003:71).

The petro-dollars also translate into jobs for millions of workers from across the Muslim world. Take, for instance, the case of Pakistan "in the single year 1983, the money sent home by Gulf emigrants amounted to \$ 36 million

compared with a total of \$ 375 million given to Pakistan in foreign aid" (Kepel 2000:71).

Egypt is another Muslim country depending on remittances from Gulf countries. At one time, three million Egyptian workers were working in Gulf countries sending home \$ 4 billion (Hiro 2002: 85).

Through this process, millions of men "had during their short-term contractual employment in Saudi Arabia, been exposed to conservative Islamic views" (Hiro 2002:87). Though these jobs offer a temporary relief for regimes threatened by fast growing populations but this relief has strings attached. The countries exporting work force to Gulf have to open their gates to Wahabism that arrives disguised as mosques, madrassas, blood banks and charities as well as investment companies and banks. In certain countries like Sudan and Egypt, "Islamic banking" emanating from Gulf has greatly contributed to the rise of political Islam.

The Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt, founded in 1977, is a typical case. Its managing director was a Saudi prince. According to Kepel: "In Egypt, these institutions were at first encouraged by those in power who saw in them an opportunity to win backing of devout middle class. They reasoned that if that class placed its money in Islamic banks and made substantial profits, it would be unlikely to join the radical opposition led by Islamists. Instead, members of the middle class would be economically integrated and would find it in their interest to perpetuate a political system that allowed them to enrich themselves.

But in 1988 the Egyptian state called a halt to this process, fearing that it would allow the Islamist movement to build up a war chest and hand the Brothers financial independence. Consequently, a campaign was launched against the banks in the press, in the same newspapers that had previously published page after page of advertisements on their behalf, as well as interviews with managing directors and fatwas favourable to them" (Kepel 2000:279-80). In 1993 the Saudis offered money to Mubarak's government on the condition that it would encourage the Islamisation of the Egyptian society. One Saudi organisation, al-Rayyan, paid Egyptian female students 15 Egyptian pounds (about \$ 5) a month pocket money to take the veil (Napoleoni 2003:119).

In 1980-85, Islamic investment throughout the Muslim world underwent a spectacular expansion, leading to creation of hundreds or so Islamic investment companies offering annual returns of around 25 percent (Kepel 2000: 279-80).

Napoleoni points out two other banks: "al-Barakaat is a Somali-based international financial conglomerate with branches in 40 countries, including the U.S.

Every year, until September 2001 when its funds were frozen by the U.S. Authorities, the US office wired at least \$ 500 million in international profits to the central exchange office located in United Arab Emirates. Of these revenues, bin Laden's network received a flat 5 per cent, equivalent to about \$ 25 million. Al-Taqwa is a bank with strong ties with Islamist groups. It was set up in Nassau in 1987 with \$ 50 million as capital, of which two-thirds came from Islamist fundamentalist organisations, one of the most important share holders was the Muslim brotherhood al-Islah of Kuwait. Among other activities, it has financed the political campaigns of Islamist candidates in the municipal elections in Egypt. The bank operatives in more than 30 countries" (Napoleoni 2003:160).

The case of Saudi Arabia

In January 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, not merely wrestled back Riyadh from rival-clan, Rashid, but re-established Saud dynasty, for the third time (Holden and Johns 1981:1-7).

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True, the camel riding Saudis have become a family of jet-setters, their commitment to Wahabism, a revivalist cult attributed to 18th century preacher Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab, has not foundered. A revivalist zealot from oasis-town of Uyayna, ibn Wahab was appalled to see Arabia sunk into corruption. The solution, he concluded, would be a return to, by force if necessary, puritan Islam (Lacy 1984:59).

Present Saudi state would not have come easily had ibn Saud not courted army of Ikhwan (Brothers). Started in 1912 (Holden and Johns 1981:69), Ikhwan were Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of Wahabism and abandoned their life to live in the Hijrah built by ibn Saud. Ikhwan would flog all persons who were caught procrastinating in their religious duties (Madawi 2002: 57-59).

However, British subsidies also played a key role in defeating Saudi rivals (Madawi 2002: 43). When ibn Saud had subdued all the rivals, Ikhwan began to become a challenge. As many as one hundred Ikhwan settlements by 1926 across the country and ability to mobilise 50000 to 60000 armed men, they were a threat indeed. Thus, in a series of battles, Ikhwan were defeated in next two years. Again, motorised transport provided by the British proved a great help in subduing Ikhwan (Halliday 2002b:57). British Royal Air force also played a role (Madawi 2002: 69).

With these victories, ibn Saud on 22 September 1932, proclaimed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Madawi 2002:71). Islamic fundamentalism for the first time in modern history had built itself a state. By the time, puritans subdued the country, they had staged public executions of 40,000 people and carried out 350,000 amputations: in a country of four million (Unger 2004: 68). On 14 February 1945, came the historic meeting between Roosevelt and ibn Saud, during this meeting oil-for-security relationship was initiated (Unger 2004:3).

On 9 November 1953, ibn Saud died. Coronation of crown prince Saud was smooth. (Madawi 2002:76-109). However, in 1954, there was an isolated mutiny in army. Communist-inspired pamphlets were found circulating in Hasa in 1955. Anti-monarchy slogans were even found on palace walls in Riyadh. In 1956, Aramco workers were on strike for three days. Strike was crushed mercilessly, 200 were arrested while three activists were beaten to death (Holden and Johns 1981: 183-88). Those were the days when Nasser's Arab nationalism and socialist ideas had caught hold of Arab imagination. Saudi Arabia was no exception.

When in September 1956, Nasser visited Riyadh (Madawi 200:116), in the run up to Suez war, thousands turned up to welcome him. Reluctantly, during the Suez crisis, for the first time Saudi oil was used as a weapon. This was Saud's last major decision. By March 1958, power was passed to crown prince Feisal under pressure from the USA (Halliday 2002b:55).

Feisal introduced some social reforms. Slavery was abolished. Girls' education was stressed. Television was introduced in 1965. However, Feisal deliberately prevented armed forces from becoming strong (Halliday 2002b:56).

Eclipsed by Nasserism and handicapped by empty exchequer, Saudi dynasty remained marginalised in Arab world until late 1960s. However, six-day Arab-Israel war, proved a landmark by ushering the fall of nationalists and heralding fundamentalism's rise.

Two factors played a decisive role: nationalists' failure to bring about meaningful social and political change. Secondly, an unheard of petro-dollars rush. Between 1965 and 1975, Saudi GDP rose from 10.4 billion riyal to 164.53 billion riyals (Madawi 2003:120).

Saudi Arabia was earning more money than it could absorb enabling Feisal to lavishly increase disbursement of government revenues, stimulating business activity and benefitting merchants. Middle class saw a chance in the system. Petrodollars were not merely transforming desert's social and architectural outlook, emerging billionaires

were forging new ties with global capital.

As the petro-dollars poured in over next twenty years, roughly eighty-four thousand ‘high-net-worth’ Saudis invested a staggering \$ 860 billion in American companies’ (Unger 2004:28). Texas-based Bush family greatly benefitted from Saudi investments (Unger 2004:295-98). Oil assigned a new role to Saudis in international politics. Oil weapon used during Arab-Israeli war in 1973 enhanced Saudi image as champion of Arab cause. It, however, annoyed Washington. Kissinger in January 1975 threatened using military force if faced with “some actual strangulation of industrialised world” as a result of oil embargo (Holden and Johns 1981: 373).

This US-Saudi friction was temporary. It in fact proved a chance for rethinking. Already, in March 1974, Saudi threat to leave OPEC was pivotal in keeping prices low (Madawi 2002: 141), demonstrating Saudi commitment to imperialism.

On March 25, 1975 Feisal was killed. His brother Khalid became king. When he was enthroned, economy was doing wonders. By 1975, per capita income was \$6,806 million. Second Development Plan envisaged an expenditure at the breathtaking figure of \$141,000 (Holden and Johns 1981: 390-96). During Khalid’s reign 1975-82, contradictions between Islamic facade and affluence started unraveling. Two events symbolised it. Mishaal, a prince, eloped with a lover, Muhalla. They were caught while escaping from Saudi Arabia. Both were beheaded. On 20 November 1979, Grand Mosque was taken hostage by armed men led by Juhaiman bin Muhammad Utaibi. His brother-in-law Abdullah al-Qahtani announced in microphone that he was the expected Mehdi. The bloody drama costing hundreds of lives ended on December 5 as Juhaiman’s band surrendered or was wiped out (Holden and Johns 1981: 511-26).

Regionally, Saudis played an even important role as US ally. They lavishly funded Iraq against Iran in its war. Saudi financial aid amounted to \$25.7 billion (Madawi 2002:157).

They financed Mujahedeen fighting Red Army in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, Fahad succeeded Khalid on his death. However, he was not as lucky. Oil prices declined. Period of austerity had arrived. In 1985, first time since 1972, electricity and gas prices were increased by 70 percent. Ordinary Saudis resented hike. Also, population explosion at the rate of 3.6 made the king feel pressure. Saudisation started. Islam was forgotten. Deportation of illegal immigrant workers meant that in 1985-86, 300000 were bundled off (Madawi 2002:150-52).

Social and economic divisions began to appear. Wealthy elite consisted of close circle of royalty, tribal nobility, a class of commercially successful educated Saudis. Middle class youth were becoming jobless and frustrated. Some responded to Osama (Madawi 2002:154).

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. Over 50000 US troops arrived leading to a tense debate. Central questions were: can Saudis get non-Muslims’ help against Muslim. Can such a government be Islamic? Mecca University’s Dr Safar al-Hawali’s taped speeches and Riyadh University’s Salman al Awdah’s lectures began to find mass hearing. On 6 Nov 1990, 45 women violated driving ban in Riyadh. Mutawa called them ‘communist whores.’ Ulema blamed this act on the presence of US troops that brought western culture with them. The groups associated with ben Laden, Advice and Reform Committee (ARC), appeared as the real oppositionist challenge. In 1996, bombs exploded near a US military mission in Riyadh and al-Khobar towers, killing Americans.

In 2000, a Saudi airliner en route London was high jacked by two Saudis. Their demands were schools, hospitals, welfare (Madawi 2002:165-85). Having eliminated secular opposition in the 1950s, Saudis were now facing religious fanatics whom they pampered and continue pampering all across the Muslim world. These fanatics point out Saudis corruption and consider further Islamisation of the society as a solution to all the ills. However, a semi-official description of the country goes like this (Yamani 1997:20): “Present day Saudi Arabia is one of the largest market

economies in the Middle East. There are no currency controls and no socialist dogma. Emphasis is placed on the private sector and its influence is encouraged to grow every day. This is perhaps due to Islamic doctrine which prevails supreme in the kingdom. Islam prescribes that all wealth is owned by God, and the individual is an agent who is entrusted with portions of that wealth and who is then held by the manner he or she uses it".

Saudi-style free market is at its best in media industry where, to borrow Sreberny's (2000: 63) phrase, "Mickey Mouse, the Spice Girls and Koran collide' literally. There was a televisual revolution in terms of channels available in the wake of First Gulf War. Sreberny says the Gulf War (1990) brought 24-hour CNN coverage, which found eager audiences and created pressure for change in the regional media industries. Not the pioneers, but Saudi royals were among the first to launch private TV channels. London-based MEBC, latterly MBC, and Rome-based Orbit were among the first private channels to wander Middle Eastern airwaves. Orbit, available on encrypted services requiring a decoder, dropped BBC World Arabic channel since it was showing "Death of Principle' (Sreberny 2000: 63-71). Similarly, Al Ra'is was cancelled. But Star Academy was aired by LBC-Sat where Saudi Prince Talal has a stake (Kraidy 2008: 189-99). Saudi Arabia is most important consumer of Egyptian TV films; hence, Egyptian films hesitate to touch upon matters sensitive to Saudi state (Hafez 1994: 8-9).

"In Saudi-financed projects, 'drinks' or kisses may not be shown. An Egyptian commentator calls it "Beduinization of Arab culture'. The other aspect of mediated culture is Jihadification of culture. Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV is the prime example. But Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad and host of Salafi groups run either TV channels or websites. The mediated, virtual Jihadist world, in turn, is largely oiled by petro-dollars.

Conclusion

It is hard to coin an all-encompassing definition that defines political Islam. Despite the definitional complexities, one can agree that Islamists plan to implement their agenda by coercion, if necessary. Their rise in last three decades owes to a number of factors, few beyond the scope of this essay, but we can analyse this phenomenon only if looked at with historical context.

Equally, important is to understand the political economy of political Islam. It is evident that Islamists were marginalised when viable left/nationalist alternatives were available. They filled the vacuum left by left/nationalists in Middle East. In their rise, overt and covert imperialist patronage or intervention has helped Islamists gain the present status. Also, imperialism is not in clash with fundamentalism. It is only a section of fundamentalism, gone "awry' or out of control, that Washington and its allies are fighting against. Osama/Hamas/Hezbollah constitutes a case of Frankenstein. The Saudi-US relationships remain cosy. Hence, "clash of civilisations' thesis hardly stand the test.

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