



Sadik J. Al-Azm

Time out of joint

Western dominance, Islamist terror, and the Arab imagination

Sadik J. Al-Azm looks at the reactions to September 11 in the Arab world and explains them in contrast to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. He points out that the Arab world can barely "clash" with the West due to the vast difference in power between the two, and he also questions the reasons for this "clash", seeing things like politics and vital interests as stronger catalysts than purely spiritual ideals.

I

There is a strong injunction in Arab Islamic culture against *shamateh*, an emotion — like *schadenfreude* — of taking pleasure in the suffering of others. It is forbidden when it comes to death, even the violent death of your mortal enemies. Yet it would be very hard these days to find an Arab, no matter how sober, cultured, and sophisticated, in whose heart there was not some room for *shamateh* at the suffering of Americans on September 11. I myself tried hard to contain, control, and hide it that day. And I knew intuitively that millions and millions of people throughout the Arab world and beyond experienced the same emotion.

I never had any doubts, either, about who perpetrated that heinous crime; our Islamists had a deep-seated vendetta against the World Trade Center since their failed attack on it in 1993. As an Arab, I know something about the power of vengeance in our culture and its consuming force. I also knew that the United States would respond with all its force to crush the Islamist movement worldwide into oblivion. But I didn't understand my own shameful response to the slaughter of innocents. Was it the bad news from Palestine that week; the satisfaction of seeing the arrogance of power abruptly, if temporarily, humbled; the sight of the jihadi Frankenstein's monsters, so carefully nourished by the United States, turning suddenly on their masters; or the natural resentment of the weak and marginalized at the peripheries of empires against the center, or, in this case, against the center of the center? Does my response, and the silent *shamateh* of the Arab world, mean that Huntington's clash of civilizations has come true, and so quickly?

In the end, no. Despite current predictions of a protracted global war between the West and the Islamic world, I believe that war is over. There may be intermittent battles in the decades to come, with many innocent victims. But the number of supporters of armed Islamism is unlikely to grow, its support throughout the Arab Muslim world will likely decline, and the opposition by other Muslim groups will surely grow. 9/11 signaled the last gasp of Islamism rather than the beginnings of its global challenge.

II

Terrorism, Joseph Conrad once wrote, is an act of madness and despair. The madness of the Islamists' spectacular attack on the World Trade Center is self-evident; its despair lies in its inevitably annihilating impact on the plotters and perpetrators themselves, world Islamism in general, and the al Qaeda networks, organizations, and systems of support in particular (including the Taliban regime in Afghanistan).

Although unique in its horror, in its desperation 9/11 can be compared to past terrorist acts that foretold the ends of the movements in whose names they were committed: for example, the abduction and murder of the German industrialist Hans Martin Schleyer by the Bader–Meinhoff gang in the summer of 1977 and the abduction and murder, a year later, of Aldo Moro, the dean of Italy's senior political leaders after World War II, by the Italian Red Brigades. In these cases a swift and decisive response would devastate not only the plotters, perpetrators, and their supporting networks and organizations, but ultimately their protective communist regimes and worldwide radical leftist movements as well. Looking back after 9/11 it seems to me that the left-wing terrorism of the 1970s in Europe was indeed a futile attempt to break out of the historical impasse and terminal structural crisis reached by communism, radical labor movements, Third Worldism, and revolutionary trends everywhere. The terrorism of that period was the first visible manifestation of that impasse and the prelude to the final demise of those movements, including world communism itself.

Today the hard-core Islamists' spectacular terrorist violence reflects a no less desperate attempt to break out of the historical impasse and terminal structural crisis reached by the world Islamist movement in the second half of the twentieth century. I predict this violence will be the prelude to the dissipation and final demise of militant Islamism in general. Like the armed factions in Europe who had given up on society, political parties, reform, proletarian revolution, and traditional communist organization in favor of violent action, militant Islamism has given up on contemporary Muslim society, its sociopolitical movements, the spontaneous religiosity of the masses, mainstream Islamic organizations, the attentism of the original and traditional Society of Muslim Brothers (from which they generally derive in the way the 1970s terrorists derived from European communism), in favor of violence. Both were contemptuous of politics and had complete disregard for the consequences of their actions.

Michel Foucault, when asked about the social and revolutionary significance of his books, answered something to the effect that they are no more than Molotov cocktails hurled at the system; they consume themselves in the act of exploding and have no significance beyond the flash they engender. Foucault believed that the only way to oppose the system is direct action in the form of local attacks, intermittent skirmishes, guerrilla raids, random uprisings, and anarchistic assaults. This is a desperate rebellion without either cause or clear objective.

Translated at the minimalist level into the activist Islamist idiom, we get, first, what some Islamists call "an act of rage in favor of God's cause," and second, the rejection of politics in almost any form — conventional, radical, and revolutionary — in favor of the violent tactics of nihilism and despair. For them, the only other alternatives are co-optation or the admission of defeat.

Translated at the maximalist level, we get an apocalyptic form of terrorism on a global scale: the belief that spectacular violence will destroy the obstacles to the global triumph of Islam, catalyze the Muslim people's energies in its favor, and create poles of attraction around which the Muslims of the world will rally — for example, the al Qaeda networks, organizations, and training camps and the Taliban model of a supposedly authentic Muslim society and government for modern times.

As the September 11 attacks have shown, the perpetrators of the apocalyptic form of terrorism, like their European counterparts, are not the desperately poor of the Arab world, but, more often than not, well-off, upwardly mobile, university-educated youths. They also share with their European counterparts a sense of entrapment in an alien and alienating monolithic sociopolitical reality and a tragic world view centered around a violent and salvific moment of truth that exposes the enveloping world of untruth, false consciousness, and false appearance. Out of the rubble, an essential Truth will emerge. In Europe it was conceived as an authentically humane and egalitarian socialist society. In the Arab world it is the authentic Islamist order reflected in such slogans as "Islam Is the Solution" and "Islam Is the Answer."

The beginnings of this kind of apocalyptic vision can be seen in the 1979 occupation of the Meccan holy shrine. In Saudi Arabia the ruling tribal elite has since the 1950s conspicuously wrapped itself, its society, and its system in the mantles of strict Muslim orthodoxy, moral purity, social uprightness, and Bedouin austerity. At the same time the contradiction between this official pretense and the country's real substance of life has only deepened. According to official pretense, all non-Wahhabis are Kafirs (apostates, infidels), but Saudi society is managed and the economy run by these very infidels and in huge numbers; Saudis kowtow in all important matters, internal and external, to the United States and its policies, and the ruling classes lead profligate, ostentatious, and debauched lifestyles, mostly behind drawn curtains. All Riyadh — and the rest of the Arab world — knows these things.

The sons and daughters of the system who took the religious pretenses seriously staged an armed insurrection, occupying the Meccan holy shrine in 1979 and shaking the kingdom to its foundations in the process. In the world of Islam, no action could be more spectacular than storming and seizing the Ka'ba itself, although the occupation itself was peaceful. The leader of the insurrection, Juhaiman Al-'Utaibi, declared one of his followers the "Mahdi" (the divine savior) and demanded an end to the ludicrous discrepancy between official Saudi ideology and pretense on the one hand and the substance of the kingdom's real life on the other by bringing the latter into strict conformity with the religious orthodoxy as officially announced and propounded.

It took some time to flush Juhaiman and his followers out of the Ka'ba. The Saudis had to call in Western assistance and expertise to be able to accomplish the job without damaging the shrine. Of course, calling on such help contradicted all the pious pretenses of the regime, and all Saudi Arabia knew it too. Those involved in the incident were eventually beheaded.

Like the 1979 occupiers of the Meccan shrine, the young Saudi perpetrators of the September 11 attacks were products of the same schizophrenic system. In fact, their leader, bin Laden, may be seen as a more dangerous, advanced, and global version of Juhaiman Al-'Utaibi. While Juhaiman directed his desperate, spectacular intervention against the most important local legitimizing symbol of the Saudi system, bin Laden attacked the American core without which the

local system could not possibly survive. But both acts of terrorism exposed the essential weakness of today's Islamists: the embrace of the inevitable emergence of a new Islamic order is itself a symptom of a self-deluding fantasy that has afflicted the Arab and Muslim world for more than two centuries.

III

A cultural form of schizophrenia is also attendant on the Arab (and Muslim) world's tortured, protracted, and reluctant adaptation to European modernity. This process has truly made the modern Arabs into the Hamlet of our times, doomed to unrelieved tragedy, forever hesitating, procrastinating, and wavering between the old and the new, between *asala* and *mu'asara* (authenticity and contemporaneity), between *turath* and *tajdid* (heritage and renewal), between *huwiyya* and *hadatha* (identity and modernity), and between religion and secularity, while the conquering Fortinbras of the world inherit the new century. No wonder, then, to quote Shakespeare's most famous drama, that "the time is out of joint" for the Arabs and "something is rotten in the state." No wonder as well if they keep wondering whether they are the authors of their woes or whether "there's a divinity that shapes [their] ends."

For the Arabs to own their present and hold themselves responsible for their future, they must come to terms with a certain image of themselves buried deep in their collective subconscious. What I mean is this: as Arabs and Muslims (and I use Muslim here in the historical and cultural sense), we continue to imagine ourselves as conquerors, history-makers, pace-setters, pioneers, and leaders of world-historic proportions.

In the marrow of our bones, we still perceive ourselves as the subjects of history, not its objects, as its agents and not its victims. We have never acknowledged, let alone reconciled ourselves to, the marginality and passivity of our position in modern times. In fact, deep in our collective soul, we find it intolerable that our supposedly great nation must stand helplessly on the margins not only of modern history in general but even of our local and particular histories.

We find no less intolerable the condition of being the object of a history made, led, manipulated, and arbitrated by others, especially when we remember that those others were (and by right ought to be) the objects of a history made, led, manipulated, and arbitrated by ourselves. Add to that a no less deeply seated belief that this position of world-historical leadership and its glories was somehow usurped from us by modern Europe *fi ghaflaten min al-tarikh* — while history took a nap, as we say in Arabic. I say usurped — and usurpation is at the heart of Hamlet's tribulations and trials — because this position belongs to us by right, by destiny, by fate, by election, by providence, or by what have you.

With this belief goes the no less deeply seated conviction that eventually things will right themselves by uncrowning this usurper, whose time is running out anyway, and by restoring history's legitimate leaders to their former station and natural function. This kind of thought and yearning comes through loud and clear in the work of authors like Hasan Hanafi and Anwar Abdel-Malek, as well as in the tracts, analyses, and propaganda of the more sophisticated Islamist thinkers and theoreticians.

The constellation of ideas they draw on is captured in the title of a European classic, Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, the false implication being that if the West is declining then the Arabs and Islam must be rising. Or, to put it somewhat differently (in a way that relates more to the title of Abdel-Malek's book *Rih al-Sharq [The Wind of the East]*), if the wind of history is abandoning the sails of the West, then it must be filling those of the East (East means principally, here, Islam and the Arabs). If we use the title of an equally famous Islamist classic by Muhammad Qutb, *Jahiliyyat al-Qarn al-Ishrin [The Jahiliyya of the Twentieth Century]*, then the implication would be, now that European Modernity has come full circle to the Jahili condition, the Arabs and Muslims must be on the verge of leading humanity once more out of the Jahiliyya created by Europe and defended by the West in general.

But this is not the end of the story. Reviewing the classics of Arab nationalism, it now often appears to me that the deeper objective of these works was not so much Arab unity as an end in itself but Arab unity as a means of retrieving that usurped role of world-historical leadership and of history-making. In fact, I can easily argue that the ultimate but unarticulated concern is not so much a struggle against colonialism, imperialism, and foreign occupation, or for independence, prosperity, and social justice, but for the restoration of the great *umma* (nation) to a role of global leadership appropriate to its nature and mission. After all, the historic civilizations of our part of the world have always been of the conquering and extroverted type: ancient Persia descending on Greece, Alexander conquering Persia and everything else within reach, Hannibal, Rome, Islam, the Ottomans, European modernity, and so on.

When this unexamined, unexorcised, highly potent, and deep-seated self-image collides with the all-too-evident everyday actualities of Arab-Muslim impotence, frustration, and insignificance, especially in international relations, a host of problems emerge: massive inferiority complexes, huge compensatory delusions, wild adventurism, political recklessness, desperate violence, and, lately, large-scale terrorism of the kind we have become familiar with all over the world.

The contradiction that I have been trying to delineate is perhaps best captured — quite gently and very ironically — in the title of Hussain Ahmad Amin's pointed and lively book, *Dalil al-Muslim al-Hazin ila Muqtada al-Suluqfi al-Qarn al-'Ishrin*. The author is a well-known Egyptian historian and high-ranking diplomat and the son of Ahmad Amin, the great historian produced by what the late Albert Hourani called the Arab Liberal Age. Interestingly enough, the title of Amin's book hints at that great classic of Western thought, Moses Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed [Gui, Dalalat al-Ha'irin]*. So a free translation of Hussain Ahmad Amin's title would read, *A Guide for the Sad and Perplexed Muslim Concerning the Sort of Behavior Required by and in the Twentieth Century*.

The contemporary Muslim or Arab is so sad and vexed in Amin's account because his cherished convictions about his civilization, religion, and providence, and their role in modern history are all given the lie by hard realities every waking minute of his life. Furthermore, the radical transformations and sacrifices required to transcend this contradiction are either undesirable or unbearable. So what else can the Muslim or Arab do but muddle through his sad perplexity in the twenty-first century with the conviction that perhaps one day God or history or fate or the revolution or the moral order of the universe will raise his *umma* to its proper role once again. Under these circumstances, various kinds of direct-action violence (including

terrorism in some of its most spectacular forms) present themselves as the only means of relief from this hopeless impasse.

There is no running away from the fact that the Arabs were dragged kicking and screaming into modernity on the one hand, and that modernity was forced on them by a superior might, efficiency, and performance on the other. Europe made the modern world without consulting Arabs, Muslims, or anyone else for that matter and made it at the expense of everyone else to boot.

While the Crusades were ultimately repulsed, Bonaparte's militarily insignificant adventure in Egypt and Palestine not only triumphed but made a clean sweep of all that had become irrelevant on our side of the Mediterranean — the traditional Memluk and Ottoman conduct of warfare, the supporting production systems, local knowledges, and forms of economic, social, legal, and political organization. The massive difference between the effects of the Crusades and the results of the French expedition of 1798 distills the essence of European modernity and puts it on show for our chastisement and edification.

In fact, modern Europe's violent intrusion into the Islamic and Arab worlds created a final and decisive rupture with the past that I can only compare to the no less final and decisive rupture caused by the violent Arab–Muslim intervention in Sassanid Persia. And just as the history of post–conquest Persia stopped making sense without the Arabs and Islam, the post–Bonaparte history of the Arab world stopped making sense without Europe and modernity. In my view, there is no running away from this reality no matter how many times we reiterate the partial truth that modern Europe got it all from us anyway: Averroes, Andalusian high culture and civilization, science, mathematics, philosophy, and all the rest. Without finally coming to terms, seriously and in depth, with these painful realities and their so far paralyzing contradictions, we truly will abdicate our place in today's world.

Is there, then, an inevitable clash of civilizations coming between an archaic Islamic world and the modern secular West, as Huntington seems to affirm in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*? I would say that in the strong and serious sense of clash, the answer is no. In the weak and more casual sense of the term, the answer is yes.

Huntington argues that after the collapse of world communism, the main source of grave international conflict (and possible wars) ceased to be the hostile rivalry between two incompatible totalizing economic systems and came to be the antagonistic self–assertion and vying of the large, comprehensive, and more or less self–contained systems of fundamental beliefs and values that dominate the post–Cold War scene, such as traditional Islam on the one hand and triumphant Western liberalism on the other.

I can make the same point differently by saying that according to Huntington, now that the historical challenge of communism, socialism, working–class movements, and Third Worldism to Western capitalist hegemony has come to a definite end, we have to look for the sources of international danger, conflict, and tension in the existing major belief and value systems that are inherently incompatible not only with capitalist liberalism but with each other as well.

For Huntington, civilization seems to reduce itself to culture, culture to religion, and religion to an archetypal constant that in the case of Islam is bound to produce the phenomenon of *Homo islamicus* propelled on a collision

course with, let us say, the West's *Homo economicus* and instinctive liberalism as well as with India's *Homo hierarchicus* and natural polytheism.

It seems clear to me that Huntington's thesis involves, first, a reversion to old-fashioned German *philosophie des geistes* and, second, a rehabilitation of the classical orientalist essentialism that Edward Said demolished so well in his book *Orientalism*. What comes immediately to my mind in this context, for instance, is the famous concoction of spirit and the system of Protestant ethical beliefs and fundamental values used by Max Weber to explain the rise of capitalism in Europe. Here we already have the spirit of capitalism clashing with the prevalent spirit of feudalism and the new Protestant ethical belief system clashing with the antecedent, adjacent, and rival Roman Catholic one.

Weber's rivalry, clash, and struggle of the two spirits and two ethics turns global and international with Huntington. This vying of spirits and belief systems is not simply historical, sociological, or evolutionary, but essentialistic, ontological, and static. This kind of ahistorical and anti-historical reasoning sets the stage for the clash of civilizations by exclusively juxtaposing a reified system of basic Western beliefs and values against another reified but incompatible system of equally basic Muslim beliefs and values.

At a more practical level, this means that such values as liberalism, secularism, democracy, human rights, religious toleration, freedom of expression, etc. are to be regarded as the West's deepest values, from which the contemporary Muslim World is permanently excluded on account of its own mostly deeply cherished values — theocracy, theonomy and theonomism, scripturalism, literalism, fundamentalism, communalism, totalitarianism, sexism, absolutism, and dogmatism — which are antithetical to the core to liberalism, secularism, democracy, and the rest.

The interesting irony in all this is that the Islamists find themselves in full agreement not only with Huntington's basic thesis but with its theoretical implications and practical applications as well. Their theoreticians and ideologists also reduce civilizations to culture, cultures to religion, and religions to inherently incompatible archetypal constants that vie, clash, and struggle with and against each other. For them, Islam will emerge triumphant in the end.

To temporarily relieve the harshness of the clash of civilizations thesis, President Khatami of Iran called for a dialogue of civilizations instead. The president's main concern here is, naturally, a dialogue between Islam and the West in general and Iran and the United States in particular. Is Khatami sincere or hypocritical in his call? In the long run he is hypocritical because the Islamist version of the Huntingtonian logic to which he is strategically committed requires a clash of civilizations and the ultimate triumph of his own. In the short run he is sincere, because dialogue is not a bad momentary tactic for the much weaker side in this confrontation.

The clash of civilizations between Islam and the West indeed exists in the weak, ordinary sense of clash, but not in the strong and more dramatic meaning of the term. Islam is simply too weak to sustain in earnest any challenge to an obviously triumphant West. In fact, contemporary Islam does not even form a "civilization" in the active, enactive, and effective senses of the term. It may be said to form a civilization only in the historical, traditional, passive, reactive, and folkloric senses.

The two supposedly clashing sides are so unequal in power, military might, productive capacity, efficiency, effective institutions, wealth, social organization, science, and technology that the clash can only be of the inconsequential sort. As one literary metaphor says, if a stone falls on an egg the egg breaks, and if an egg falls on a stone the egg breaks too. From the Arab Muslim side of the divide, the West seems so powerful, so efficient, so successful, so unstoppable, that the very idea of an ultimate "clash" is fanciful.

As for the current tensions, suspicions, confrontations, and enmities that characterize the relationship of Islam to the West, they are certainly not purely affairs of the spirit, or simply clashes of religious ideas or theological interpretations, or merely matters of beliefs, values, images, and perceptions. They are the normal affairs of history, power politics, international relations, and the pursuit of vital interests.

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