

## The spirit of Ramadan

### It beckons us to moral regeneration

**W**ITH the turn of the year the holy month of Ramadan has appeared in the Muslim world with its message of self-restraint, spiritual cleansing and moral regeneration. The revered month provides the believers with the opportunity to wipe off the blemishes from their hearts, and guides them to be good human beings. And they will do so through daylong fasting, refraining from crass materialism, practising austerity and offering special prayers for their salvation. Perhaps in the month of Ramadan the true essence of Islam finds expression in its totality.

Ramadan also has a social message beside the spiritual one. The month tells all to remain resolute in their commitment to build a just society where equality, brotherhood and equity would be given utmost importance.

Since Islam is a total religion, Ramadan has a message for the common people, social leaders and politicians as well. This year we are observing Ramadan against the backdrop of unrelenting political unrest. In the quietude of the month of Ramadan, let the process of dialogue be given a boost through initiatives by the government that are readily reciprocated by the opposition. With a foreboding political situation looming over the head it becomes difficult for the devotees to stay calm on the road to piety. The sooner the simmering political situation calms down and a consensus is reached to break the impasse, the better the people will be served.

Ramadan is not to be mistaken for a month to practise fanaticism or orthodoxy. The agents of chaos and destruction in the name of Islam need to be told in clear language that Bangladesh is no place to promote stereotyped and violent brands of religion. There are attempts to misinterpret Islam. But a true devotee will always be able to glean the essence of the religion.

We hope the government will take all measures to maintain law and order, keep the prices of essentials in check and ensure uninterrupted supply of utilities throughout the country in this holy month.

The onus rests especially on the traders and business community to restrain their urge for making unjust profit on daily necessities. It needs no emphasising that price hike increases the woes of the poor.

## Attack on a professor

### A faultline in law and order

**T**HE news of three hoodlums barging into the residential flat of Professor Aftab Ahmed and shooting him at point blank range heightens the concern for security of people who are thought to be well protected by reason of where they stay. The university staff quarters located at Fuller Road are supposed to be an exclusive zone, a fortified area where arrival of any strangers would be normally noticed and their identity checked and cross-checked with the people they intended to see.

The blatant shooting at Prof Aftab confirms the prevailing laxity of security arrangements in and around the living quarters of the university teachers. We are concerned to note this vulnerability of even teachers to attacks. The very plotting of such an assault is a reflection of a kind of dare-devilry that feeds on an entrenched impunity culture.

In a separate incident the same day some unidentified individuals threw a grenade at the residence of a BNP lawmaker, MH Selim. Fortunately, the device did not explode.

Only the other day at a high level meeting of all the law enforcing agencies no less than the State Minister for Home himself had declared, based on intelligence information, that all possible measures have been taken to check criminal activities, particularly during the month of Ramadan and the Durga Puja celebrations. But there seems to be a chink in the armoury.

We are of the firm conviction that as much as there is an urgent need for beefing up security to prevent recurrence of any brutal and tragic incident, there should also be serious efforts on the part of the agencies concerned of the government to bring to justice the perpetrators of previous crimes. To-date, the scenario in this regard, to say the least, is dismal.

We wish to see more of real action on the ground than rhetoric.

# Making of a "new Middle East" or its balkanisation?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

## PERSPECTIVES

**Equally, to the Zionist visionaries of a "greater Israel," holding sway from the Nile to the Euphrates, dividing Iraq into three or four mini-states is not only desirable, but also unavoidable. An unbeatable Israel, lording over a clutch of impotent Arab states on the regional chessboard is a more appealing and workable proposition. If that's the outlook on the part of the US and its comprador regional ally, Israel, the bleak fate of the Muslims is a foregone conclusion.**

**T**HE term "new Middle East" is no more a cliché. President Bush and his secretary of state may be absolutely right about a "new Middle East" being born -- but on their terms. In fact, their policies in support of the US surrogate in the region, Israel, have helped midwife the new-born. But it is not exactly the prototype they had envisioned. For one thing, it is neither secular, nor friendly to the United States. For another, the birth of the baby was far from smooth.

What's happening in the Middle East now can be seen as a boomerang effect that has been playing out slowly since the tragedy of September 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the US worldwide sympathy poured in for the US.

The global community spontaneously supported its "war on terror," including invasion of Afghanistan. But then, the cynical exploitation of the universal goodwill by the so-called neo-con cabal in the Bush administration to advance hegemonic designs, duly confirmed by the unprovoked invasion of Iraq, disillusioned the world. The Bush administration's statements, of Iraq having WMD as well as al-Qaeda links, which proved false, further eroded US credibility.

Against a declining moral standing President Bush staged a comeback of sorts in the first year of his second term. He shifted his foreign policy rhetoric from "war on terror" to a war of ideas, and a struggle for democracy and liberty. Through much of 2005 it looked as if the Middle East might

at long last have its efflorescent spring of freedom.

Lebanon forged a Cedar Revolution triggered by the assassination of its popular prime minister, Rafiq Hariri. Egypt held its first multi-candidate presidential election in 50 years. Palestine and Iraq also made steady progress towards democracy despite harsh conditions imposed by occupation. The Hamas mobilised candidates and popular campaigns to win a plurality in the Palestinian legislative election and to form a new government. The Hizbollah in Lebanon and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt achieved similar electoral success.

And with these developments a sudden chill fell over the democratic enthusiasm in Washington and other Western capitals.

Instead of welcoming the newly emerging forces to the democratic fold, Washington was strangely on the back foot, and it began a cold war against the Muslim democrats. Even the tepid pressure on the autocratic allies of the US to democratize, in 2005, had all but disappeared in 2006.

Yet none of the parties, groups and movements -- including Hamas and Hizbollah -- are in anyway inimical to democracy. All of the new forces of democracy have accepted an electoral system and practiced electoral politics -- probably too well for Washington's taste. So, now Washington's cold war against the Islamists baptised to democracy has escalated into a shooting war -- first against Hamas in Gaza and then against Hizbollah

in Lebanon. Israel is perceived in the region to be the agent acting on behalf of US interests.

The "new Middle East" being hawked by Washington is indeed pegged to the bedrock of a number of weak, but ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, states. Weak in military terms, so as not to resist American and Israeli domination of the region, and homogeneous so as not to have any rumblings of discontent on the fundamentals of statehood. The mantra mesmerizing the top political gurus in Washington is no longer the "new world order" with regard to the Middle East but a "new Middle East" hammered out from the burnt-out bricks of the order that Bush and his neo-cons initially intended to foist on Iraq, and then on the rest of the Arab world. The "new Middle East" may be followed by a new Iraq, new Iran, and new Afghanistan, which are integral to the whole exercise of redrawing maps and changing regimes. The US Armed Forces Journal, it is learnt, has purportedly sketched out new maps of the regional Muslim states after the birth of the new Middle East.

It is, however, a damning inference for the right-wing US academic and political pundits that

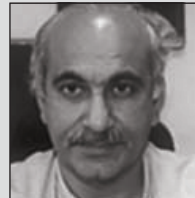
America's awe-inspiring presence in Iraq, and a policy of turning Israel into a military behemoth, has failed to dampen the spirits of the regional countries like Iran or Syria, and even non-state entities like Hizbollah and Hamas, to challenge the US and Israel both militarily and politically.

President Bush and his cabal of strategic planners, like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, are not prepared at all to change course. In self-delusion and paranoia they still stick to their rhetoric of bravado: "not changing the course," or not inclined to "cut and run," is what one invariably hears from them in any discourse on Iraq.

Equally, to the Zionist visionaries of a "greater Israel," holding sway from the Nile to the Euphrates, dividing Iraq into three or four mini-states is not only desirable, but also unavoidable. An unbeatable Israel, lording over a clutch of impotent Arab states on the regional chessboard is a more appealing and workable proposition. If that's the outlook on the part of the US and its comprador regional ally, Israel, the bleak fate of the Muslims is a foregone conclusion.

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## Help wanted?



M.J. AKBAR

## BYLINE

**Whether wise or not, that certainly begs a question: what has happened in the weeks since that incident to persuade Dr Manmohan Singh that Islamabad can be a partner in the solution to our most difficult and painful problem? Every citizen has the right to know the answer, and judge its credibility, otherwise suspicion will provide its own set of answers. Before a solution obtains the grandeur of a multilateral approval, or a bilateral agreement, it must pass the sieve of a national, unilateral acceptance. The first base is home, and it always comes first.**

**T**HE key to understanding the latest turn in Anglo-American policy towards India and Pakistan is that recent incidents of terrorism in Britain owe as much to local Muslim anger about Kashmir as they do to Iraq or Palestine. A good percentage of British Muslims are Mirpur-Kashmiri in origin, with links to jihadi groups in Pakistan, and provide an abundant source of British-Muslim suicide terrorists.

Tony Blair, anxious to sew some of the tatters on his reputation before he leaves office, is keen these days to address the "root causes" of Muslim anger, and Kashmir is right up there along with Palestine. He has made a well-advertised trip to Palestine. Kashmir is more complicated. But by any logic, George Bush is the better interlocutor, since he has excellent personal relations, as well as political leverage, with both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Pervez Musharraf.

This perhaps was why it was Bush who raised the issue of Kashmir during his talks with Pervez Musharraf on Friday, September 22, in Washington, rather than the other way round. It is logical for Musharraf to bring Kashmir up. Why did Bush do so? I am not revealing any state secret. This comes straight from Bush himself.

This nuance has not yet

reached the attention of Indian public opinion, which is understandable. It also seems to have eluded the Indian establishment, which is less explicable.

During his comments to the media after the talks, Bush said that he "admired" Musharraf's leadership and praised him as a symbol of moderation, according to the news agencies AP and AFP. He then added that he "raised the Kashmir issue with the Pakistani leader." Bush went on to ask Musharraf: "What can we do to help? What would you like the United States to do to facilitate an agreement? Would you like us to get out of the way? Would you like us not to show up? Would you like us to be actively involved? How can we help you, if you so desire, to achieve peace?"

It was an interesting, and even remarkable, array of options. Musharraf did not tell us what his answer was, but he certainly would not have kept silent. Instead of Pakistan asking for America's help, it was America asking what it could do to help. We will learn about the implications of these remarks when they begin to take effect on policy.

Musharraf informed Bush that his meeting with Dr Manmohan Singh in Havana had been "excellent" and that India and Pakistan were "moving on the Kashmir dispute especially." The story from Delhi so far has con-

centrated on the "joint mechanism" for a concerted effort between India and Pakistan on terrorism. The stress has not been on Kashmir, but maybe Musharraf understands what happened differently.

Bush linked Kashmir and Palestine. He agreed that the US could not impose a settlement in either dispute. But, he added: "We can help create the conditions for peace to occur. We can lay out the vision. We can talk to world leaders -- and we do."

The September pirouette began a few days earlier with a slight twid, almost inevitable since Bush and Musharraf have to negotiate through so many thickets to find common ground. But it quickly picked up momentum, and indeed some style, since both knew what they were doing. That their meeting ended in laughter and expressions of admiration says a great deal about the confidence Bush has in Musharraf, who has proved to be a master strategist. Who else but Musharraf could sell the deal he made with the Taliban as another tactic in the war against terror? And Bush bought it.

But was it a one-way swap? Did Bush have something to sell as well?

Pakistan has been in the news in an American campaign season (the elections to Congress in the first week of November) for the

worst reason on Bush's long list of problems: Osama bin Laden.

Five years ago, America went to war against a Taliban-led Afghanistan to find Osama bin Laden, the self-declared mastermind of 9/11. If the Taliban had handed over their permanent guest to America, the case for an invasion would have collapsed. Five years later Osama is still free, and questions are being asked.

On the weekend before 9/11, I happened to be on a CNN program called At War This Week. I pointed out that while America, despite its satellites and the most sophisticated military and intelligence presence in the region, claimed that it could not find Osama, Osama seemed perfectly capable of finding America whenever he wanted. He had just reasserted this ability by sending another tape, replete with his familiar themes, to Al Jazeera in the week before the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

Did these tapes reach Doha on Aladdin's magic carpet? It was common knowledge that the tapes went from Osama's residence to Qatar by old-fashioned, almost antique, Cold War tradecraft: letter box drops and a courier system. If British and American intelligence agencies, honed on Cold War espionage, could not discover a fairly porous human chain then one has to

suspect either their ability or their intention. It is a tough choice.

Such were the dilemmas that persuaded Wolf Blitzer of CNN to ask Bush, during an interview, whether he would send American troops in pursuit of Osama if he received reliable intelligence that Osama's safe haven was in Pakistan. Bush replied in the affirmative. Was he taking Pakistan's agreement for granted, or had a deal already been made with Musharraf that American troops would be permitted to use Pakistani soil for their operations? Musharraf objected to Bush's unilateral decision, but this clearly had no impact on the bonhomie of their meeting. American troops are already in Afghanistan, with close communications support from Pakistan, and the border isn't etched on stone.

Diplomacy is about give and take, and Musharraf has taken back with him to Islamabad some forward movement on Kashmir from his linked trip to Havana and Washington. The phrase he used at the White House -- "we are moving on the Kashmir dispute especially" -- was not accidental. The use of "especially" was particularly deliberate. We are not aware of the full meaning of this word. Perhaps we will discover that after the first phase, that of a "joint mechanism," is in place.

The "joint mechanism" on terrorism between India and Pakistan opens the way for a bilateral body that has the ability to monitor and investigate terrorist incidents in Jammu and Kashmir and the rest of India, since this mechanism has been designed to allay Indian concerns about Pak support for terrorism in India. This is an extremely bold move, since Delhi has co-opted the country it has accused of terrorism into the solution of the problem. The presence of

Pakistan police officers in Delhi and Mumbai, and certainly Srinagar, will arouse unprecedented levels of interest. The reaction of Indian intelligence officers will be even more interesting.

No sane person would want to sabotage a solution to the Kashmir problem, and if George Bush and Tony Blair can help attain one, then may they get half of the Nobel Peace Prize money that awaits Musharraf and Manmohan Singh. The tough part is the definition of a solution, even after we have managed to define terrorism. The official Islamabad line, repeated as frequently as you want to hear it, is that the violence in Kashmir is not terrorism but a war of liberation. Words, words, words: and how much blood flows between them ...

The disconcerting fact about the Havana deal is that it is a marked departure from the line that Delhi has been taking for at least a year. The immediate reaction to the Mumbai train blasts, for instance, was to blame Pakistan.

Whether wise or not, that certainly begs a question: what has happened in the weeks since that incident to persuade Dr Manmohan Singh that Islamabad can be a partner in the solution to our most difficult and painful problem?

Every citizen has the right to know the answer, and judge its credibility, otherwise suspicion will provide its own set of answers. Before a solution obtains the grandeur of a multilateral approval, or a bilateral agreement, it must pass the sieve of a national, unilateral acceptance.

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# Of holy Ramadan and unholy profiteers



ANM NURUL HAQUE

## BY THE NUMBERS

**The holy month of Ramadan is ordained as a period of prayer and penance for the Muslims. But the Muslims in Bangladesh cannot not fully devote themselves to meditation and worship as the worry of fresh price-hikes of essentials has already gripped them. The price of essentials is such a crucial issue that it directly affects the life and living of the common people. So there must be no laxity on the part of the government in taking all-out steps to bring down the prices of essentials within the reach of the common people.**

**T**HE month of Ramadan has begun with all its divine grace and holiness, and the Muslims across the world have started practicing forbearance and self-abstinence. The Muslims in Bangladesh will also practice self-abnegation during this month to realize the core spirit of Ramadan. But most of the businessmen (obviously they are Muslims in name) always target the month of Ramadan for sheer profiteering through market manipulation, and these profiteering syndicates have already started their old game.

Rising prices of essential commodities on the eve of

Ramadan has become a recurrent phenomenon in our country. There is no need for any substantial grounds for raising the prices of essentials on the eve of any festival, as we do not have any remedial measures against such irrational price hike. In fact the suffering of the common people is matched by the government's inaction to control prices on the eve of any festival.

Islam puts special emphasis on maintaining sanctity and austerity during the holy month of Ramadan. Irrational price hike during Ramadan is strictly prohib-

ited in Islam. But the unscrupulous traders and profiteers care very little for these teachings of Islam. The government also takes it for granted that the people shall endure the burden of extra expenses for the sake of holy Ramadan.

Although the tendency is old, weak governance and poor surveillance tend to fuel the old greed. This fresh upward movement of prices of essentials has accelerated with the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan. Commodities like onion, ginger, lentil, sugar, and chick-peas,

which are widely consumed by the common people during the month of Ramadan, have already registered another round of steep increase, and are now selling at exorbitant prices. Naturally, worry about a fresh price-hike of the essential commodities during the holy month of Ramadan has gripped millions of people, as the continuing high prices have already eroded their real income.

The Commerce Ministry, which is mainly responsible for maintenance of price line, does not have any control over the market. The new commerce minister, who

roared against the profiteering syndicates immediately after taking over, finally said a few days ago that it was not his responsibility to control prices. The profiteers, thus, received indirect encouragement, and another round of price-hikes followed. The sufferers are borne by poor consumers who have no alternative but to submit to the profiteers.

According to the latest media reports, the prices of all essentials have marked further rise ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan. There are clear indications that the holy month of Ramadan is going to be a month of immense hardship for the people of limited income as the prices of almost all the essentials are spiraling out of control. This price-spiral may not affect the rich people so much, but it always intensifies the woes and hardship of the millions of people who have limited income and face difficulty in meeting the rising cost of living.

The unbridled prices in the Ramadan are attributed to some factors that do not sound reasonable. The businessmen as usual

attributed the price hike to short supply of some of the products, and said that the rising trend might continue if fresh supplies are not ensured during Ramadan. The profiteers are using this as a pretext for a perpetual price hike.

The sufferers of the common people are likely to increase further in the fasting month of Ramadan despite recent government steps to vend some widely used commodities through the TCB and the BDR personnel.

The Essential Commodities Control Order of 1981 covers some 35 essential commodities, the prices of which are to be kept under vigilance by the government. But the provisions of the order have been bypassed, or ignored. It is not the operation of the economic forces, but the intrusive factors that are responsible for the erratic market behaviour. So the government must play a stronger role in curbing the syndicated price-hike.

What makes matters more disgraceful is that the prime minister says the price hike is not affecting people as the rise in purchasing power helps them

absorb the increase in prices of essentials. The people from all strata of life have become infuriated by such a remark by the prime minister, who was supposed to tell the people not to worry as the government has taken appropriate measures to halt the rise in prices.

The purchasing powers of some people, who have accumulated huge wealth through all sorts of dubious means, no doubt, have increased beyond our imagination. A section of people has become rich, overnight, by questionable means, while the majority of the people are hard pressed to obtain two square meals a day.

Apparently, the government has so far taken no steps to check the price-spiral. The government's inaction on prices is really strange and bewildering as the majority of the people have been groaning under the crushing burden of price-spiral. The government, however, has now decided to deploy the law-enforcing agencies, including the Rab, for controlling prices.

According to media reports, the Home Ministry has asked the

importers to reduce prices of all essential commodities during the holy month of Ramadan. Fearing the consequences, many of the big importers have already sold their commodities outside the country, and others have cancelled the letter of credit opened for import of essential commodities. This is sure to have an adverse effect on the market.

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ANM Nurul Haque is Daily Star columnist.