

Suicidal ignorance

THE extraordinary turbulence of the present moment during the US military campaign against Afghanistan, now in the middle of its second month, has crystallised a number of themes and counter themes that deserve some clarification here. I shall list them without too much discussion and qualification, as a way of broaching the current stage of development in the long, and terribly unsatisfactory history of relationships between the US and Palestine.

We should start perhaps by restating the obvious, that every American I know (including myself, I must admit) firmly believes that the terrible events of 11 September inaugurate a rather new stage in world history. Even though numerous Americans know rationally that other atrocities and disasters have occurred in history, there is still something unique and unprecedented in the World Trade Centre and Pentagon bombings. A new reality, therefore, seems to proceed from that day, most of it focused on the United States itself, its sorrow, its anger, its psychic stresses, its ideas about itself.

I would go so far as saying that today almost the least likely argument to be listened to in the United States in the public domain is one that suggests that there are historical reasons why America, as a major world actor, has drawn such animosity to itself by virtue of what it has done. This is considered simply to be an attempt to justify the existence and actions of Bin Laden, who has become a vast, over-determined symbol of everything America hates and fears. In any case, such talk is and will not be tolerated in mainstream discourse for the time being, especially not on the mainstream media or in what the government says.

The assumption seems to be that American virtue or honour in some profoundly inviolate way has been wounded by an absolutely evil terrorism, and that any minimising or explanation of that is an intolerable idea even to contemplate, much less to investigate rationally. That such a state of affairs is exactly what the pathologically crazed world-view of Bin Laden himself seems to have desired all along - a division of the universe into his forces and those of the Christians and Jews - seems not to matter.

As a result of that, therefore, the political image that the government and the media - which has mostly acted without independence from the government, although certain questions are being asked and criticism articulated about the conduct of the war itself, not its wisdom or efficacy - wish to project is American "unity". There really is a feeling being manufactured by the media and the government that a collective "we" exists and that "we" all act and feel together, as witnessed by such perhaps unimpor-

By now, at least, it should be clear: the US just doesn't get it. It's time for a change of policy, writes Edward Said

tant surface phenomena as flag-flying and the use of the collective "we" by journalists in describing events all over the world in which the US is involved. We bombed, we said, we decided, we acted, we feel, we believe, etc, etc.

Of course, this has only marginally to do with the reality, which is far more complicated and far less reassuring. There is plenty of unrecorded or unregistered scepticism, even outspoken dissent, but it seems hidden by overt patriotism. So, American unity is being projected with such force as to allow very little questioning of US policy, which in many ways is heading towards a series of unexpected events in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the meaning of which many people will not realise until too late.

In the meantime, American unity needs to state to the world that what America does and has done cannot brook serious disagreement or discussion. Just like Bin Laden, Bush tells the world, you are either with us, or you are with terrorism, and hence against us. So, on the one hand America is not at war with Islam but only with terrorism, and on the other hand (in complete contradiction with that, since only America decides who or what Islam and terrorism are), "we" are against Muslim terrorism and Islamic rage as "we" define them. That there has been so far an effective Lebanese and Palestinian demerit at the American condemnation of Hizbullah and Hamas as terrorist organisations is no assurance that the campaign to brand Israel's enemies as "our" enemies will stop.

In the meantime, both George Bush and Tony Blair have realised that indeed something needs to be done about Palestine, even though I believe there is no serious intention of changing US foreign policy to accommodate what is going to be done. In order for that to happen, the US must look at its own history, just as its media flacks like the egregeous Thomas Friedman and Fouad Ajami keep preaching at Arab and Muslim societies that that is what they must do, but of course never consider that that is something that everyone, including Americans, also needs to do.

No, we are told over and over, American history is about freedom and democracy, and only those: no mistakes can be admitted, or radical reconsiderations announced. Everyone else must change their ways; America remains as it is. Then Bush declares that the US favours a Palestinian state with recognised boundaries next to Israel and adds that this has to be done according to UN resolutions, without specifying which ones, and while refusing to

meet Yasser Arafat personally. This may seem like a contradictory step also, but in fact it isn't.

For the past six weeks there has been an astonishingly unrelenting and minutely organised media campaign in the US more or less pressing the Israeli vision of the world on the American reading and watching public, with practically nothing to counter it. Its main themes are that Islam and the Arabs are the true causes of terrorism, Israel has been facing such terrorism all its life, Arafat and Bin Laden are basically the same thing, most of the US's Arab allies (especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia) have played a clear negative role in sponsoring anti-Americanism, supporting terrorism, and maintaining corrupt, undemocratic societies.

Underlying the campaign has been the (at best) dubious thesis that anti-Semitism is on the rise. All of this adds up to a near-promise that anything to do with Palestinian (or Lebanese) resistance to Israeli practices - never more brutal, never more dehumanising and illegal than today - has to be destroyed after (or perhaps while) the Taliban and Bin Laden have been destroyed. That this also happens to mean, as the Pentagon hawks and their right-wing media machine keep reminding Americans relentlessly, that Iraq must be attacked next, and indeed that all the enemies of Israel in the region along with Iraq must totally be brought low, is lost on no one. So brazenly has the Zionist propaganda apparatus performed in the weeks since 11 September that very little opposition to these views is encountered. Lost in this extraordinary farrago of lies, bloodthirsty hatred, and arrogant triumphalism is the simple reality that America is not Israel, and Bin Laden not the Arabs or Islam. This concentrated pro-Israeli campaign, over which Bush and his people have little real political control, has kept the US administration from anything like a real reassessment of US policies towards Israel and the Palestinians. Even during the opening rounds of the American counter-propaganda campaign directed to the Muslim and Arab world, there has been a remarkable unwillingness to treat the Arabs as seriously as all other peoples have been treated.

Take as an example an Al-Jazeera discussion programme a week ago, in which Bin Laden's latest video was played in its entirety. A hodgepodge of accusations and declarations, it accused the US of using Israel to bludgeon the Palestinians without respite. Bin Laden, of course, crazily ascribed this to a Christian and Jewish Crusade against Islam, but most people

in the Arab world are convinced - because it is patently true - that America has simply allowed Israel to kill Palestinians at will with US weapons and unconditional political support in the UN and elsewhere. The Doha-based moderator of the programme then called on a US official, Christopher Ross, who was in Washington to respond, and then Ross, a decent but by no means remarkable or even fluent Arabic speaker, read a long statement whose message was that the US, far from being against Islam and the Arabs, was really their champion (e.g. in Bosnia and Kosovo), plus the US supplied more food to Afghanistan than anyone else, upheld freedom and democracy, etc. All in all, it was standard US-government issue. Then the moderator asked Ross to explain why, given everything that he said about US support for justice and democracy, the US backed Israeli brutality in its military occupation of Palestine. Instead of taking an honest position that respected his listeners and affirmed that Israel is a US ally and "we" choose to support it for internal political reasons, Ross chose instead to insult their basic intelligence and defended the US as the only power that has brought the two sides to the negotiating table. When the moderator persisted in his questioning about US hostility to Arab aspirations, Ross persisted in his line too, more or less claiming that only the US had the Arabs' interests at heart.

As an exercise in propaganda, Ross's performance was poor of course, but as an indication of the possibility of any serious change in US policy, Ross (inadvertently) at least did Arabs the service of indicating that they would have to be fools to believe in any such change. Whatever else it says, Bush's America remains a unilateralist power, in the world, in Afghanistan, in the Middle East, everywhere. It shows no sign of having understood what Palestinian resistance is all about, or why Arabs resent its horrendously unjust policies in turning a blind eye to Israel's mafeasant sadism against the Palestinian people as a whole. It still refuses to sign the Kyoto convention, or the anti-land-mine conventions, or to pay its UN dues. Bush can still stand up and lecture the world as if he were a schoolmaster telling a bunch of unruly little vagrants why they must behave according to American ideas.

In short, there is absolutely no reason at all why Yasser Arafat and his ever-present coterie should grovel at American feet. Our only hope as a people is for Palestinians

to show the world that we have our principles, we occupy the moral high ground, and we must continue an intelligent and well-organised resistance to a criminal Israeli occupation, which no one seems to mention any more. My suggestion is that Arafat should stop his world tours and come back to his people (who keep reminding him that they no longer really support him: only 17 per cent say they back what he is doing) and respond to their needs as a real leader must. Israel has been destroying the Palestinian infrastructure, destroying towns and schools, killing innocents, invading at will, without Arafat paying enough serious attention.

He must lead the non-violent protest marches on a daily, if not hourly basis, and not let a group of foreign volunteers do our work for us. It is the absence of a self-sacrificing spirit of human and moral solidarity with his people that Arafat's leadership so fatally lacks. I am afraid that this terrible absence has now marginalised him and his ill-fated and ineffective PA almost completely. Certainly Sharon's brutality has played a major role in destroying it too, but we must remember that before the intifada began, most Palestinians had already lost their faith, and for good reason. What Arafat never seems to have understood is that we are and have always been a movement standing for, symbolising, and getting support as the embodiment of principles of justice and liberation. This alone will enable us to free ourselves from Israeli occupation - not the covert manoeuvring in the halls of Western power, where until today Arafat and his people are treated with contempt. Whenever, as in Jordan, Lebanon and during the Oslo process, he has behaved as if he and his movement were just like another Arab state, he has always been defeated. Only when he finally understands that the Palestinian people demand liberation and justice, not a police force and a corrupt bureaucracy, will he begin to lead his people. Otherwise he will founder disgracefully and will bring disaster and misfortune on us.

On the other hand, we must not as Palestinians or Arabs fall into an easy rhetorical anti-Americanism. It is not acceptable to sit in Beirut or Cairo meeting halls and denounce American imperialism (or Zionist colonialism for that matter) without a whiff of understanding that these are complex societies not always truly represented by their governments' stupid or cruel policies. We have never addressed the currents in Israel and America which it is possible, and indeed vital, for us to address, and in the end to come to an agreement with. In this respect, we need to make our resistance respected and understood, not hated and feared as it is now by virtue of suicidal ignorance and indiscriminate belligerence.

Soldiers only

Peace remains a mirage in the minds of Afghan fighters, writes Sylvie Briand of AFP from Khanabad in Afghanistan



PHOTO: AFP

Peace is a concept alien to many Afghans who have known nothing but war

HERE is talk of peace in Afghanistan these days, but it is an alien concept to many Afghans who have known nothing but war and for whom soldiering has become a way of life. "I would like it if my children could know peace and go to school," said Sadreddine, a 30-year-old commander serving with the Northern Alliance. "Personally, I've never been to school and war is all I know," he told AFP on the frontline near the northern city of Kunduz.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked the beginning of more than two decades of almost continual conflict, whose misery was compounded by drought and near famine.

The 10-year struggle against the Soviet occupation was followed by a bloody civil war which moved to the north of the country after the Taliban came to power in 1996.

"I can't honestly say that I've had my fill of war. After all, it's my job," said commander Sadreddine. "But I don't want the same for my children. I have seen too many friends with their throats cut and lost my four brothers in combat."

Abdul Hai, 19, received two years of education before his school was destroyed and he joined the ranks of the Northern Alliance.

"I'm not sure what I'll do once the Taliban have finally been defeated," Hai said. "I'm not against the idea of the war continuing. I like the life of a soldier and I die tomorrow, well... that's the will of Allah."

The prospects for peace in Afghanistan were boosted by an agreement on November 20 to convene an inter-Afghan conference in Germany as the first step in a five-point UN plan that envisages democratic elections in two years.

But the process will be a tortuous one and Afghanistan's history of ethnic and tribal rivalry is a rocky foundation on which to build dreams of a fully representative, broad-based government.

"I'm keeping my Kalashnikov with me," said one sceptical soldier. "Peace? I don't believe it will happen."

Patriotism overdrive

Jingoistic, sugar-coated, superficial - those are just some of the criticisms levelled at US television networks' coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan in recent days - and not just by the foreign competition, writes Louise Daly of AFP from Chicago

COLUMNISTS for newspapers as diverse as the conservative Wall Street Journal and the liberal New York Times have deplored what they described as the networks' shallow and soft-focus reporting.

The Journal's Tunku Varadarajan has attacked the superficial analysis offered by CNN's "parachute" journalists, while the Times' Caryn James lamented US television's "knee-jerk pandering to the public mood."

Weighing in on the US cable and networks for their "myopic view", James criticised editors for caving into patriotism "rather than informing viewers of the complex, sometimes harsh realities they need to know."

"If a priority of America's war on terror is holding a global coalition together, it helps to know, without sugar-coating, what the rest of the globe is thinking," she wrote.

At a media industry conference this week in Barcelona, Spain, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's news chief said he was startled by the contrast between US and European small-screen coverage of the 45-day-old war.

"It's like watching two different wars," said Tony Burman, executive director of Canada's national public broadcaster.

"The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) has focused very much on the humanitarian issues in the region... the human dimension," while NBC, ABC and CBS had anchored their reports "almost exclusively" around Pentagon briefings, he explained.

"There seems to be a real reluctance on the part of the US television media to dwell on the human impact," he said.

Burman also noted that the "uncritical, hyper-patriotic" reporting differed remarkably little between the three national networks, which, he felt, were all toing the administration line. "They're in lockstep with the administration... and there's no distinction between the networks, which is unusual in a competitive environment."

Bill Wheatley, vice president of NBC News, brushed

Peace is about as common here as water in a desert.

"We were on reasonably good terms with the Russians before things turned sour and it was pretty much the same with the Taliban. When this war is over, we'll almost certainly end up fighting the Americans," he said, laughing.

Soldiers are everywhere along the road to Khanabad town not far from Kunduz city - the Taliban's last holdout in northern Afghanistan.

With Kalashnikovs or rocket launchers slung over their shoulders, they walk to and from the frontlines, passing the streams of refugees fleeing the fighting and heavy US aerial bombardment.

Said, 24, who fought with the Northern Alliance for four years before becoming a driver, is less than complimentary about his former comrades in arms.

"With their Kalashnikovs, they think they can do whatever they like," Said said, complaining that the soldiers often forced him to stop at gunpoint and give them a free ride.

Said dreams of the sort of freedom that would allow him to kiss a woman in public and says he would like to leave Afghanistan for good.

"Most young Afghans want to go to Iran or Tajikistan, where it's possible to live and work," he said, ruing the fact that his own illiteracy made such a move unlikely.

His friend, Faizullah, is 29 and holds an engineering diploma from his days as a student in Russia. But he is unemployed and sees little chance of changing his circumstances around in Afghanistan.

"An engineer is supposed to build things, but I live in a country where we destroy everything," he said bitterly.

Amin, an unemployed physics professor, says he understands the disaffection of young Afghans.

"What sort of future do they have to look forward to? The women are virtually ghettoised and the men are used as cannon fodder," Amin said. "Only one thing can save this country, and that's getting the schools open again."

Policy blunders that spawn terror

WHILE waging its war against the Taliban, the United States is actively promoting the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance as the major - if not sole - alternative. But the record of the eight-year-old Alliance is an unpalatable one.

Washington has blundered often in its Afghanistan policy since 1979. Its decision in 1980 to back Islamic fundamentalist Afghans, ignoring the secular, nationalist groups opposing the Soviet-backed leftist regime in Kabul, produced the Afghan Mujahedin - and its progeny, Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida.

Though the title "Northern Alliance" today applies principally to the ethnic Tajik-dominated political formation in a small north-eastern enclave of Afghanistan, it was originally coined by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek leader and of the National Islamic Movement.

After consolidating his control of six northwestern provinces of Afghanistan (out of 31), he began calling himself "President of the Northern Alliance" in 1993.

Dostum, 47, is a chameleon-like character.

He started out as a Communist union chief at a gas field constructed by Soviet technicians. Following the Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan from December 1979, he was told to establish an ethnic Uzbek militia.

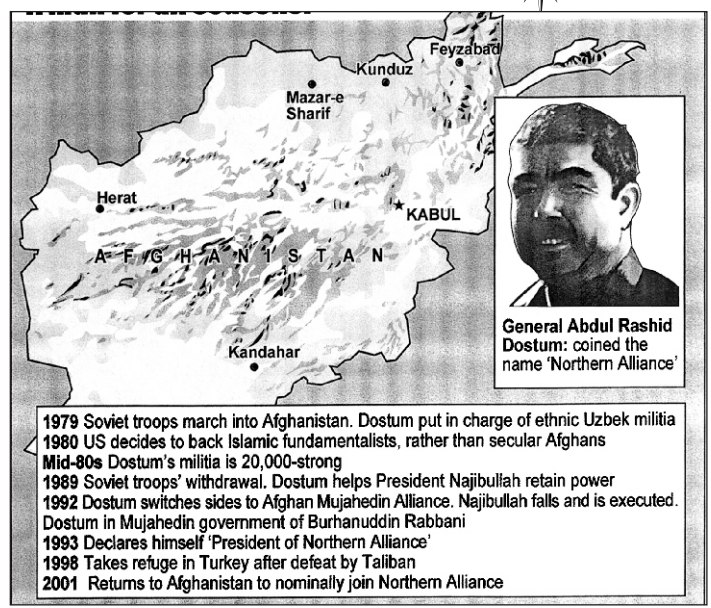
By the mid-1980s, it was 20,000 strong.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, he actively helped leftist leader Muhammad Najibullah retain power. But in March 1992 he switched sides and went over to the seven-party Afghan Mujahedin Alliance. Najibullah fell the next month.

Dostum served briefly in the Mujahedin government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik. Soon he broke away to become "President of the Northern Alliance", with his capital in Mazar-e-Sharif.

He enriched himself and set up an airline, Balkh air, which did not last. In August 1998, the Taliban defeated him, and he took refuge in Turkey.

In March 2001 he returned to Afghanistan and nominally joined the Northern Alliance, which by then had become almost totally Tajik. Given the record of flip-flops, his



1979 Soviet troops march into Afghanistan. Dostum put in charge of ethnic Uzbek militia
1980 US decides to back Islamic fundamentalists, rather than secular Afghans
1989-90 Dostum's militia is 20,000-strong
1989 Soviet troops withdrawal. Dostum helps President Najibullah retain power
1992 Dostum switches sides to Afghan Mujahedin Alliance. Najibullah falls and is executed. Dostum in Mujahedin government of Burhanuddin Rabbani
1993 Declares himself 'President of Northern Alliance'
1998 Takes refuge in Turkey after defeat by Taliban
2001 Returns to Afghanistan to nominally join Northern Alliance

statement that if the Taliban were overthrown, he would accept President Rabbani's orders must be treated with great scepticism.

When Soviet troops went into Afghanistan in late 1979, there were several secular and nationalist Afghan groups opposed to the Moscow-backed Communists, who had seized power in a military coup 20 months earlier. Washington had the option of bolstering them and encouraging them to ally with the three traditionalist Islamic factions, two of them monarchist.

Instead, it befooled up the three fundamentalist Islamic groups there. Moderate Islamic leaders saw no option but to ally with hard-liners, which led to the formation of the radical-dominated Islamic Alliance of Afghan Mujahedin in 1983.

The main architect of this US policy was Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. A virulent anti-Communist of Polish origin, he saw his chance in Moscow's Afghan intervention to rival his predecessor Henry Kissinger as a heavyweight strategic thinker.

It was not enough to push Soviet tanks out of Afghanistan, he reasoned. It was also an opportunity to export a composite ideology of

nationalism and Islam to the Soviet Union's Muslim-majority Central Asian republics in order to destroy the entire Soviet order.

With this in mind, a US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance set about financing, training and arming Afghan and non-Afghan Mujahedin, an enterprise that lasted almost a decade.

But though the Soviets left and the American involvement ended, the programme of training and financing assorted Mujahedin to fight holy wars in different parts of the world continued.

It culminated on 11 September when three flying bombs destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York and damaged the Pentagon in Washington DC.

Washington is not alone in foisting such short-sighted policies. Israel made a similar mistake in regard to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) - a secular nationalist body.

With the PLO emerging as the dominant force in the occupied Palestinian territories in the mid-1970s, Israel decided to encourage the growth of an organisation known as the Islamic Centre, based in the Gaza Strip.

Brigadier-General Yitzhak Segev, then military governor of Gaza, told the *New York Times* how,

Washington has often backed the wrong players in Afghanistan, culminating in the current nightmare - Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida. In Egypt and Israel, too, extremist forces have returned to bite back at their backers. With the Northern Alliance now on the rise in Afghanistan the same mistakes are being made in the war against terrorism, Dilip Hiro writes from London

during 1979-84, he financed the Islamic movement as a counterweight to the PLO and Communists: "The Israeli government gave me a budget, and the military government gives [money] to the mosques."

The mosques to which Segev channelled government cash were the ones run by the Islamic Centre.

In 1980, when Muslim fundamentalists built down the Red Crescent Society burning in Gaza City, a body funded indirectly by the PLO, the Israeli army looked the other way. The Israeli army and intelligence complicity was later confirmed by Moshe Arens, Israel's defence minister in 1983-84.

"There was no doubt that during a certain period the Israeli governments perceived it [Islamic fundamentalism] as a healthy phenomenon that could counter the PLO," he wrote in his memories.

When the first Palestinian *intifada* erupted in December 1987, the leaders of the Islamic Centre established Hamas, the acronym of *Harkat Al Muqawama Al Islami*, Movement of Islamic Resistance.

Hamas in turn set up a military wing, naming it after Izz al Din Qassam, a leader of the Arab *intifada* of 1936-39 against the British mandate in Palestine.

Hamas has since proved to be

unrelenting opponents of the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian Territories - more so than the PLO.

Then there is Egypt.

In 1971, President Anwar Sadat instructed General Abdul Munim Amin, a pro-Islamist officer, to establish, train and arm 1,000 Islamic groups - al Gamaat al Islamiya - at universities and factories to fight what he called "atheist Marxists".

The programme was so successful that the al Gamaat acquired an independent existence. In the 1978 election of university student union officials, al Gamaat won 60 per cent of the posts. In February 1979 it cheered the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, condemned the hospitality that Sadat had accorded the deposed Shah of Iran and raised the slogan, "No separation between Islam and the State."

In March 1979 it opposed the peace treaty Sadat signed with Israel. And in October 1981 it applauded Sadat's assassination by Islamic extremists.

There was a lull during the first decade of Mubarak's administration before it began repressing Islamists in the early 1990s.

In the meanwhile, bolstered by the return of its militants from Afghanistan - where they had acquired experience as armed guerrillas under a programme overseen by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) - al Gamaat escalated its campaign in Egypt.

Its terrorist activities continued throughout the 1990s, resulting in hundreds of deaths of policemen and civilians, as did the government repression. In 1999 it declared a unilateral ceasefire. In return, authorities released some 5,000 al Gamaat detainees. That still left 15,000 in jail.

Now things have come full circle. The rather unreliable Gen. Dostum is being encouraged by the US to recapture Mazar-e-Sharif. And the 'war against terrorism' is spawning a revival of activity in Egypt by al Gamaat as well as the more extreme al Jihad al Islami, which is allied to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaida.

- Gemini News

Dilip Hiro is the author of *Between Marx and Muhammad: Changing Face of Central Asia*.