

The Islamist terrorist and the Islamic apologist

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE terror of September 11, 2001 has produced a great deal of anger against Islam in the western world; it has also produced a crop of apologists, both among Muslims everywhere and in the west. The latter group includes political leaders keen to be seen as friends of Muslims, especially the Muslim electorate. It is easy to understand western politicians standing up for mainstream Islam. It is difficult to understand Muslim apologists at a time when the primary need in Muslim societies is for critical inquiry and self-examination.

In the popular writings that have emerged since September eleven, those of Asghar Ali Engineer stand out, not least in the frequency at which they appear. Their author is also a good example of a Muslim apologist. The following paragraphs are aimed primarily at his latest article, written after the London bombings of July 7, 2005 and printed in The Daily Star, July 21, 2005, and which is fairly representative of the apologist genre of thinking.

In Mr. Engineer's world view, the recent terrorist attacks are essentially hit and run tactics of some desperate youths against the vastly superior military might of the west. While the problem under discussion is bombings by terrorists who claim to be Islamists, the focus shifts to the destructive might of the west. About the latter, Mr. Engineer thinks it necessary to remind us -- lest we forget -- that "modern weapons are highly destructive and can kill hundreds or thousands at a time. America dropped (sic) atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and killed more than 200,000 at a time." One is hard put to understand what the point of the reminder is. If it is only to stress that the destruction of human life that has been committed by the west has been on a vaster scale than what small bands of Islamist terrorists are capable of, he has indeed used what appears to be a very large red herring. To top it, and in the same vein, he also points out that the means of destruction used by the terrorists are all manufactured by the west.

More important, he does not think that the terrorists are religious fanatics. In other words, there is no religious dimension to the recent acts of terrorism. "No psychologist will agree with such oversimplification [that these acts of terrorism are products of religious fanaticism]," he asserts. We shall ask at the end whether he has an explanation or a remedy that is not an oversimplification. Let us first see whether an Islamic connection of recent terror-

Their objective is to establish Islamic states in the image of their version of Islam, and impose their will on the rest of us. What a fundamentalist regime will do is clear from what they did in Afghanistan and in Iran. Islamic apologists are only fooling themselves if they think the terrorists are fighting for freedom and liberty.



The future of Islam? Armed soldiers guard the way to Kazimiya mosque in Baghdad.

ism is a mere figment of the imagination.

To start with the London bombings, it is unlikely that Mr. Engineer has not heard of fanatic clerics like al-Masri or Omar Bakri. For years these clerics and others have been relentlessly spreading venom against the infidels. This they had been doing openly in forums of the mosque. Al-Masri was seen haranguing with a sword in hand. The clerics did not mince words; even capturing 10 Downing Street some day in the name of Islam was openly fantasised. Some of these clerics eulogised the September 11 hijackers, or refused to condemn them, calling them martyrs of Islam.

Madrasas are often, and rightly, considered the breeding ground of religious extremism and hatred of the infidel. But the potential influence of the preachers should not be underestimated. While much of the preaching in mosque sermons centres around piety, tirades against infidels are by no means uncommon. There are numerous, though lesser, al-Masri and Bakris. And one does not have to be a madrasa student to listen to them in a mosque. The point sometimes made -- and Mr. Engineer does so -- that many of the terrorists who struck in the US in September 2001, and all the London bombers, were products of non-madrasa education, becomes meaningless in this context.

Mr. Engineer considers the London bombers not fanatics but "angry young men boiling with anger at these western countries destroying their countries and killing and raining death and destruction." The use of "their countries" is rather puzzling. And if one needs further proof of

the bombers were all British. Could he be implying that even though Britain was their adopted home, their real allegiance lay abroad, perhaps based on some concept of Islamic ummah? If that is the case, the "Islamic" nature of their violence becomes all the more evident.

Talk of violence and Islam, the theme of Mr. Engineer's apologetics, and one has to talk of present-day Iraq. Mr. Engineer is in no doubt that the violence there is simply a product of rage against occupation of the country by infidels. Such rage, in must be granted, is very much present in the country. It must also be conceded that much of the terrorist rage is directed against the infidels and not at home-bred autocratic regimes, or for that matter against an occupier when it happens to be another Arab country. After all, there was no such rage when Iraq occupied Kuwait one and a half decades ago. But the point about the rage being anti-infidel, and not anti-autocracy, only reinforces the argument that much of the terrorist acts in Iraq today is "Islamic" in nature, at least by the terrorists' definition of Islam.

Finally, Mr. Engineer calls the "religious fanaticism" explanation of terrorism "oversimplification." While terrorist actions can be motivated by a complex set of factors, I have argued above that religious fanaticism is foremost among them. But which approach does Mr. Engineer suggest we take to combat terrorism that is not an oversimplification? He seems to be suggesting that we wait for a Gandhi in our midst. This is certainly a noble thought. But not many of us will find comfort in it.

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Meeting our energy needs

These are important national energy issues for us to work out for the better future of Bangladesh tomorrow. We must set out our energy objectives which should be one of the prime tasks for the Energy Regulatory Commission to enforce and implement. They should rightfully be the body to regulate usage and conserve our finite source of fossil fuel, which the nation can ill afford to squander.

SA MANSOOR

THE undeniable truth is that our world today runs on electricity. Electric power has instant availability and is the energy of choice for providing creature comfort at home and at work. Its role in computing and communication is beyond question. It also powers the railways and mass transport systems in many parts of the world. Most of us take it for granted, as it is there at the flick of a switch. It is a versatile source of power available with ease at home or at work. So popular is this energy source that its consumption has more than doubled in the last quarter of the twentieth century!

Because of its wide application the production, transmission and distribution of electricity has been treated as a service to the people. This was the main reason why, by and large, these activities have largely been undertaken by national or local governments; like the supply of water, health, and education to a large extent. Nowadays this approach is gradually being redefined, and the private sector is playing a significant role particularly in the developed economies of the world. This in turn has led to an increasing demand for electricity, and consequently a heavy burden on our finite fuel supply, particularly coal, oil, and natural gas.

It is near certain that the price of fuel will rise as demand for electricity grows. By and large we can predict the same scenario for Bangladesh. With economic growth, the demand for fuel will increase, along with its price. Our domestic fuel, gas and coal should naturally follow the international oil price trend in terms of energy equivalent pricing, otherwise there will be pressure for selling of gas which is already there. In future, similarly, there may be demands on our coal. Therefore, the pricing of our coal and gas in line with global energy equivalent price per ton of oil becomes imperative.

This step, along with a positive policy of keeping our electrically operated equipment at the home, office and factories, through the usage of only energy efficient equipment, will conserve our resources. Also there has to be a policy in place for ensuring that the growing road transport sector is run by fuel

efficient diesel or petrol engines. Passenger vehicles and other hybrid powered vehicles now coming into commercial use that consume less fossil fuel, need to be vigorously brought into usage. Any financial subsidy locally will be more than offset by foreign exchange saving for oil import.

The prospect of natural sources of energy, and harnessing of solar and wind energy as power source should be our top priority. Till our natural gas is available we should aim to recover every kilowatt of power available in pressure reducing station, a potential energy source that is going to waste today.

To sum up we should give top priority to frame policies within a tight time frame to realise the following:

=Ensure energy conservation by having financial incentives to bring in energy efficient power plants, electric motors, household electrical goods (fridges, air conditioners, even mobile phone and other battery charges to name a few) to conserve our fossil fuel.

=Explore all avenues of solar, wind and hydro-electric and gas transmission power sources. It may not be cost-effective today, but with rising global price of oil, will be later. If necessary subsidy on oil in the primary or downstream levels can be diverted to subsidise alternative power sources and power conservation program. This should be our national policy.

These are important national energy issues for us to work out for the better future of Bangladesh tomorrow. We must set out our energy objectives which should be one of the prime tasks for the Energy Regulatory Commission to enforce and implement. They should rightfully be the body to regulate usage and conserve our finite source of fossil fuel, which the nation can ill afford to squander.

S. A. Mansoor is Director, Engineering, Partex Group.

Great Game reloaded

AHMED RASHID writes from Lahore

In a major twist to the continuing Great Game on Central Asia's landmass, Russia and China are attempting to reclaim the dominant role in the region that they ceded to the US in the aftermath of 9/11. Though their ham-handed attempt to expel American bases from the region has been foiled for the moment, the jockeying for power, influence, and resources in this nebulistic region, put on hold until now, is back in full force. Beneficiaries in the latest phase of the Great Game may well be the small countries in the region if they can deftly play one against the other.

The latest act of the game was played out in the open when US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld flew into Bishkek on July 25 to foil the Russian-Chinese attempt. Kyrgyz Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, standing with Rumsfeld, assured him that the Americans would not leave in a hurry. "The presence of the US base fully depends on the situation in Afghanistan," Isakov said and added: "Today the minister (Rumsfeld) noted that the situation in Afghanistan has not finally got back to normal."

The first move in the game of diplomatic chess came on July 5 when Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao, while meeting with the four Central Asian Republics at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, made an unprecedented demand for the withdrawal of US troops from the region. The SCO statement said that as stability returns to Afghanistan, foreign troops are no longer needed in Central Asia.

"As the active military phase in the anti-terror operation in Afghanistan is nearing completion" the statement said, it was time "to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents presence" in member countries. The July 5 demands -- first of their kind by the SCO -- reconfigure the organization as a major alliance in the Central Asian region, firmly in the hands of Russia and China and a major challenger to NATO's Partnership for Peace program in Central Asia.

In subsequent statements by Moscow designed to put pressure on the Central Asian states to act

quickly, it was evident that Russia was prepared to live with the threats still emanating from Afghanistan, in order to drive the Americans out of Central Asia. China, which has always been apprehensive of US troops based close to its borders, was keen to voice its demands through an international organisation, rather than pick an individual fight with the US.

However, the SCO demand rested on the flimsy grounds that

the first. In the aftermath of 9/11 the US established two major bases in the region: the first at Karshi-Khanabad, or K2, in southern Uzbekistan, and the other at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. Both have serviced US troops and aircraft in Afghanistan. Presently 800 US troops are stationed in Uzbekistan and 1000 in Kyrgyzstan. France and NATO set up air bases in Tajikistan at Dushanbe and Kulob in the south.

can be activated in a hurry to provide access to US troops.

In fact, the trigger to change the position of Russia and China has been their fear that the recent dramatic events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan may have increased US influence in the region. In the spring, Kyrgyzstan's long term President Askar Akayev was swept from power and replaced by an interim government headed by Kumanbek Bakiev, who on July 10 won the first

In Uzbekistan, however, the Pentagon faces a far more difficult task. The massacre of protesters by President Islam Karimov's security forces in Andijan on May 13, sparked worldwide outrage against the regime. The killing of an estimated 700 innocent people led to widespread condemnation by the US, the UN and the European Union and a demand for an independent enquiry into the massacre, which Karimov refused.

Since the Andijan massacre, Karimov has been assiduously courted by Russia and China. He has visited both countries and enlisted their support in rejecting calls for an independent enquiry. Russia, which has had an on and off relationship with Karimov in the past now cemented its relationship, while China had extracted oil and gas concessions from Uzbekistan.

Since the SCO summit all three Central Asian states with Western bases have themselves called on the US to review base agreements, although as Kyrgyz leaders made clear, they were being forced to do so by Russia. As General Richard Myers, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it: "It looks to me like two very large countries were trying to bully some smaller countries."

Although Uzbekistan has not yet agreed to the continued base facility, it is unlikely to seriously want the Americans out. They were happy to become US partners after 9/11 in order to receive greater US aid, but also to keep the demands of Russia and China at a distance and balance out all three superpowers in the region.

None of the Central Asian countries can afford to antagonise the US to the extent that Russia wants them to, while they value good relations with the West. They are just as keen to keep Russia at a distance. Ultimately they will reassure the Americans about base agreements, albeit charging greater fees. They will then have to appease Russia and China, possibly by granting Russia additional basing rights.

When Secretary Rumsfeld returns home this week he will have won the first skirmish in the battle for the control of Central Asia, but maintenance of the US bases and political influence will now require closer and constant attention.

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Guard of honour for US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld on recent trip to Tajikistan.

Afghanistan is secure, which contradicts Russia's lamentations of the failure of President Hamid Karzai and US forces to stabilise the situation there and assert that the Afghans are giving sanctuary to Islamic extremists accused of stirring up trouble in Uzbekistan and Chechnya. Just between March 1 and July 25, 700 people were killed due to Taliban resurgence as the country prepared to hold parliamentary elections on September 18.

The US has rebuffed the SCO demand and said it would hold talks with each individual state. Rumsfeld's Bishkek meeting was

free and fair presidential elections held in Central Asia.

Both China and Russia have thrown their weight behind the region's autocratic rulers in order to prevent further regime change or moves towards greater democracy.

The role played by US-funded NGOs and events in Kyrgyzstan, although far from the democratic revolutions that swept Georgia and Ukraine, angered Russia and China. Moscow especially felt that the loss of its former communist satraps in Central Asia would weaken its influence and usher in pro-US leaders.

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motion, especially Sir Isaac Newton's law of reciprocal actions. The law states: When ever one body exerts force upon a second body, the second body exerts an equal and opposite force upon the first body. In popular vernacular, this law is also known as "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Osama bin Laden has translated Newton's law into his own words: "If you bomb our cities, we will bomb yours."

In 1986, US jets bombed Qaddafi's military headquarters and barracks in Tripoli, Libya's capital and its largest city. A missile went astray and caused fatalities in a civilian neighbourhood.

In 1998, US missiles destroyed a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, Sudan's capital and its biggest city. Civilians were killed, but the factory was found to have no terrorist links. The picturesque night bombings of Baghdad, Iraq's capital and its biggest city, during the two Gulf wars, introduced fantasy to the high-tech art of killing. Six million inhabitants of Baghdad lived under terror, night after night. The comprehensive demolition of Falluja, another big city in Iraq, killed hundreds of civilians. Guided and misguided missiles have also killed scores of civilians in many other Muslim cities, including Bandarab, Kut, and Tikrit.

Gung-ho experts would go

further and recommend that the US military undertake more decisive campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Sudan, and other Islamic countries to root out evil from its source. Bomb them good and plenty, they say.

These experts perhaps mean

well. They want to do something to make America safe, instead of giving sermons to evil perpetrators. But they ignore the laws of

killing. But terrorists are different. They have no other intention but to terrorise our civilians and cities. Hence we are good and they are evil, the logic goes, because they have no moral claim to violence as we do.

The distinction above is perhaps fine in the realm of morality. But Newton's laws of motion recognise no such morality. When one body exerts force upon a second body, it cannot say to the second body: I have a good moral reason to hit you. Therefore, do not hit me back. Regardless of morality, the second body will obey the laws of motion.

The laws of motion do not justify terrorist violence. Nor do they merge good and evil. Moral distinctions are important to live in human communities. Only the purest pacifist would claim that all violence is bad. Others would distinguish among forms of violence. Particularly governments would continue to defend violence in the name of morality and national security ignoring the Newtonian warning that carnage begets carnage.

But all is not bleak. England's ingenuity tells us that natural laws of motion need not be divorced from human morality. English poet John Donne, who shared the 17th century with Newton, and who is also buried in London, captured the union of law and morality in his famous poem For Whom the Bell Tolls, declaring: "Each man's death diminishes me/For I am involved in mankind." This is the lesson that city bombers need to learn.

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