



A matter of power, not religion

After London suffered its July bombings, **Adam Holm** (BSc Economics 1983), editor of the opinion pages in the Danish national daily *Politiken*, interviewed **Fred Halliday**. An extract follows.

AH: Has the war against terrorism been successful?

FH: The USA has had some success in capturing leaders of Al Qaida, but this is not an index as to how the overall conflict is going: the war in Iraq, which, on my reading now, the USA cannot win, and the continued failure to establish a viable Palestinian state, along with Chechenya and other issues, mean that however many people the US captures, more can be, and probably will be, recruited. This whole game of measuring, let alone quantifying, the number of enemies killed or put out of action is silly, in this context, as it was in the Vietnam war: it ignores the overall political and strategic situation, and the underlying trends, which are going in a very different direction. If, however, people are saying that, in the longer run, the West will not be defeated by these groups and that most of the states they seek to challenge will survive, then I would agree with that. But we are a long way from that – neither Iraq nor Afghanistan are secure victories, and there is a probability of more attacks against western targets, and targets in the west, in the years, if not decades, to come.

AH: What is required to stop, or minimise, the religiously motivated terrorism that we are now witnessing in parts of the west and in many places in the Arab world?

FH: The crisis we face, and which people in the Middle East face, has in some way become more interconnected, hence my use of the term ‘Greater West Asian Crisis’ in regard to the linking over recent years, in popular imagination, and in the vision of states, of such disparate questions as Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Chechenya. But there is also a more diffuse cause of opposition, the unrepresentative and corrupt character of states, and, not least, social and cultural resistance to change and what is broadly seen as globalisation. So the individual questions and crisis countries can and should be seen in their own light and treated as such: the case for a just, stable and two state solution in Palestine should not rest on the broader strategic picture but on its own merits. Ditto the others. The containing and suppression of religiously justified terrorism will be helped, but not ensured, by solving these questions. I would not say ‘religiously motivated’ because the main issues are nationalist and ‘anti-imperialist’ ones if you read the statements of Al Qaida – and, however much we condemn their methods and political simplifications, the main issues are eminently understandable, even conventional, political ones – that the territory of Muslims is being occupied, that corrupt rulers are being kept in power by the West, that the natural resources, mainly oil, are being pillaged, that Muslims are being discriminated against in the West. These may be exaggerated and they do not justify mass murder, but they are standard, modern, third world criticisms. Religion provides a means of expressing them.

AH: Do you agree with the British Muslim writer Ziauddin Sardar who suggested recently that Islam has to change fundamentally?

FH: There is no simple, or necessary, relationship between terrorism and religion. First, terrorism, be it that of states (the original, French revolutionary and later Bolshevik, meaning) or of armed opposition groups, is a product of modern, secular, politics. It has long had no relation to religion at all: as late as the 1970s we had Palestinian ‘Marxist-Leninists’, Kurdish far left wing fighters, Tamil Tigers, Peruvians in Sendero Luminoso, all carrying out actions that, on a broad but reasonable basis, we could call terrorism. Secondly, religion as such, in the sense of texts and traditions, and the injunctions of contemporary clergy, can endorse or oppose anything – there is plenty that is bloodthirsty in the texts of the major religions, just as there is much that is benign, cosmopolitan and tolerant. It is not the religion that determines the political means chosen to pursue an end, it is the political groups of today who select and use religion, giving it one interpretation, for their current ends. I am no more in favour of saying that Islam, or any other religion is inexorably linked to some sort of violence than I am of getting up and claiming that these belief systems are really ‘religions of peace’. Both involve selection from a more complex set of possible meanings. I always read Ziauddin Sardar with great interest, but I see no sense in this ‘change fundamentally’ argument. From its inception, and especially from some of the major debates between more dogmatic and more flexible interpretations of religion in mediaeval times, there have been plenty of writers and trends within Islam that are compatible with diversity, tolerance and, in today’s terms, democracy and liberalism. Western critics of Islam, and Islamic fundamentalists themselves, try to drown out the liberal and open-minded thinkers that have been writing for a century or more, but the problem is not some change in ‘Islam’, whatever is meant by that in this case, but a change in the balance of power, within states, judicial systems and societies, to permit the alternative explanations to prevail. It is a matter of power, not of religion.

AH: What is your understanding of Islamic terrorists? Are they as numerous and as dangerous as is often believed by Western politicians, pundits and media?

FH: There can be no simple answer to that question. The most important point to keep in mind about terrorists is that cruel and vicious as they are, they are acting for political goals, namely to take power in specified countries: to paraphrase, terrorism is the continuation of politics by other means. The foot soldiers may be fanatics, but the leaders are political strategists and have a calm, long term, view of their goals, which is not the same thing as saying these goals are attainable. There are, in the Middle East alone, around ten groups characterised by their

opponents as ‘terrorist’, the majority of them, such as the PKK in Turkey, the Mujahidin in Iran, the GIA in Algeria or Hizbullah in Lebanon, clearly confined to one country. Only Al Qaida and its followers operate transnationally, within the region and in the West. Iran has since the revolution of 1979 supported allied guerrilla groups in a number of countries – notably Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. But in the latter two this has recently been more or less in line with US wishes and policy, as was Iranian covert support to the Bosnian Muslims during the early 1990s. As for accusations that Iran supports Al Qaida, I would doubt this very much: Bin Laden and his followers, such as Al Zirqawi in Iraq, are virulently hostile to Shiites.

AH: Which, in your view, is more dangerous? American unilateralism or Islamic fundamentalism?

FH: This is not a reasonable choice, and I would certainly not want opposition to one to involve indulgence of the other. Moreover, each is, to the cost of many, including western Europe, to some degree encouraging the other. But while we can condemn each we must also try to understand them, in the sense of taking their determination seriously and in seeing the causes, which will not easily go away, of these changes, to our east, in the Muslim world, and to the west, in the USA. As a citizen and an academic, I am sometimes as exasperated and frightened by the lack of serious interest in, and study of, the USA – a fascinating, diverse if difficult country – as I am by the stereotyping of the Muslim world. Anti-US prejudice may itself have its own dangers, as does prejudice against Muslims.

AH: Will the war against terrorism last as long as the Cold War?

FH: The Cold War, in the sense of the global conflict between Soviet communism and the West, lasted just over four decades, from the late 1940s until the collapse of the USSR in December 1991. With regret, I think the conflict between transnational Islamic military groups and their opponents, in the Muslim world and in the West, could last much longer. It is not irrelevant to ask when it began: the conventional, and quite reasonable, starting point is 11 September 2001, but, even if we take the criterion of the war as being attacks on western, specifically US, targets, the groups associated with Al Qaida, or which later merged into Al Qaida, had been active for at least eight years before that, in planning the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Centre, in a series of attempted actions against planes in 1995 and in the 1998 bombings of the two US embassies in East Africa. If we broaden out the range of targets, as I think we should, then the story goes even further back: for these armed groups began life, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in the context of the Cold War itself, in attacks not against ‘western’ or US targets, but against the targets associated with the Soviet Union and with left-wing or secular forces within the Muslim world itself. The campaigns of Al Qaida against the USA in the 1990s and beyond had their roots, ideologically and organisationally, in the campaign against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s, that is, in one of the sharpest conflicts in the Cold War. People in the Middle East recall that these fundamentalists, in power and in opposition, have, for two decades or more, been threatening and in some cases killing left-wing and secular opponents – such as the Moroccan socialist leader Oman Bin Jelloun in 1975, the Sudanese independent Muslim thinker Ahmad Taha in 1989, the Egyptian liberal writer Faraj Fuda in 1992, not to mention a long list of Iranian and Afghan writers and secular politicians killed in the 1980s and 1990s. It is for this reason, above all, that I find it so disturbing to see the supposedly left-wing mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, indulging a prominent member of the Islamist camp, Sheikh Qaradawi. Turning to the situation since Manhattan, Madrid and London, we see this broad

transnational movement, inspired but at the most only loosely coordinated by Al Qaida, which is active both in the Islamic world and in the West. We know that it represents not only a minority of Muslims, and a minority of those termed ‘Islamist’ – those who want to solve today’s political and social problems in terms of Islamic ideas and texts – but also of the very militant Jihadi strand that has been fighting governments such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East itself.

This battle within the Jihadi camp, between those who want to attack the ‘Near Enemy’ in states in the Middle East, and those who want to go for the ‘Far Enemy’, in western Europe and the USA, has been going on for over a decade and the latter are a minority even among the Jihadis. (There is a very interesting new book on this by the Arab American LSE graduate, Fazaz Gerges (MSc International History 1986) *The Far Enemy* (CUP)). But there are enough of them in the Islamic world and in the west to sustain intermittent armed actions – assassinations, attacks on civilians, bombings – and a generalised sense of insecurity and alarm for a long time to come. Moreover, while some of the original leaders may well have been killed or captured – and in this the Americans have had significant success since September 2001 – the very dramatic impact of these events, and, more importantly, the mobilising impact of the war in Iraq, whatever you think about its initial justifications, mean that more and more recruits are being drawn towards military action. I do not think that this insurgency will have difficulty in recruiting sufficient numbers of fighters, in Europe or the Middle East, for years to come.

Which brings me to the unwelcome conclusion and answer to your question: in this respect the lessons of recent guerrilla groups in Europe are relevant – the Basque ETA and the Provisional IRA. ETA began fighting in 1959, PIRA in 1969: only now, long after the initial justifications for their revolt have gone, and after a long period of economic and political change in their respective areas of recruitment and electoral mobilisation, has the prospect of a permanent end to political violence become evident. This, and the fires kindled by Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechenya, to name but four, suggest that we are going to have to face this challenge for a long time to come.

I wrote in *Two Hours That Shook the World* that we would be lucky to have settled this matter in a hundred years. Those words were written in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001. Unfortunately, I see no reason to revise them now. Democratic politics and society can prevail over this challenge, and the peoples of the Middle East, who have suffered most, and will suffer more, from these groups will emerge the stronger from this experience: but it will take a very long time, rather longer, I fear, than the four decades of the Cold War.



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- In the autumn the Cold War Studies Centre hosted the public lecture series *America as Another Country?* See www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CWSC
- Founded at LSE in 1971, *Millennium* is one of the leading journals in the field of international relations. See www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/intrel