

Muslim on Muslim Violence: What Drives It? **by Salim Mansur***

Since Samuel Huntington's widely read *Foreign Affairs*'s essay, published in the summer 1993 issue of the journal, the idea of "the clash of civilizations" has come to be the most handy explanation of the troubled relationship between the Muslim world and the West. Huntington's phrase, "Islam has bloody borders," was provocative and yet not inaccurate. Islamic or, more appropriately, Muslim militancy has fuelled a mindless and bigoted conflict, civilizational in nature, that sort of peaked with the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

But what Huntington's essay, and later his book on the same theme, and other writings of similar kind does not mention, and the subject remains largely unexplored, is the bloodier conflict within the Muslim world. The phenomenon of Muslim violence against Muslims demands attention, for it is primarily this inner conflict which periodically spills over beyond the borders of the Muslim world. More Muslims have been killed by Muslims, more Muslims continue to be victimized by Muslims, and more Muslims are in danger of dying at the hands of Muslims than non-Muslims. This is a subject that demands a wider examination and attention than has been given by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Of Muslim violence against Muslims, we are concerned here primarily with the politically organized violence of those in power against those who are contesting that power, and the appeal to Islam is made in common by all parties in the conflict. In writing about this subject, we do not need to look at the record of Muslim violence against Muslims from archives, for the subject continues to be part of the experience of contemporary Muslims and in many instances is part of their living memory. In my case, I was both a victim and a witness to organized violence of a Muslim majority state against its own population with the result that one out of seven people, nearly ten million, were forced from their homes to take refuge in a neighbouring country as refugees and over half-million were killed.

I am referring to the actions of the military government of Pakistan against the people of former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, in 1971. This was a politically catastrophic event of genocidal proportions in the modern history of the Muslim world. A brief description of the culture and politics surrounding the founding of Pakistan in 1947, and the manner in which it broke apart 24 years later, can well illustrate that aspect of Muslim history, Muslim violence against Muslims, that has received insufficient notice in the writings about Muslims and Islam.

Here I will merely provide a brief overview of Pakistan within the larger context of Indian history, or more appropriately, the history of Islam and Muslims in India. The more interesting aspect of the subject of this paper is explaining the nature of Muslim on Muslim violence that makes a mockery of Islam.

The case of Pakistan is not unique in Muslim history. The violence that has characterized much of its history is quite common and persistent within most Muslim societies since the very early years of Islam. In recent times, in the three decades following the violent break up of Pakistan in 1971, we may cite from a long list of similar violence a few examples of Muslims engaged in brutal conflicts within a state, or inter-state conflicts of two or more Muslim majority states. Within Pakistan sectarian violence has continued since 1971; the politics of Islamization under the military dictator General Zia ul-Haq

* *Salim Mansur is a professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario and a syndicated columnist in Canada and the United Kingdom. A Muslim native to Calcutta, India, and a noted Islamic scholar, Prof. Mansur has written extensively on Islamic extremism and the challenges facing contemporary Islam.*

added another dimension to this violence with the execution of an elected president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in 1979. Other examples of similar kind are: state-directed violence and counter-violence of Muslim extremists in Egypt, the killing of Anwar Sadat; the repression of Palestinians inside Jordan in 1970-71; the sectarian strife in Lebanon during the 1970s; the seizure of the holy mosque in Mecca in 1979 and the violence that followed; the violence in Iran since 1979 between followers and opponents of the late Ayatollah Khomeini; the nearly decade long Iran-Iraq war; the civil war inside Syria culminating in the Hama uprising of 1982 and its severe repression by Hafez Asad; the civil war in Algeria since at least early 1992; the unsettled situation in Afghanistan following the brutal rule of the Taliban. And then there is the case of Iraq.

In all of the violence and counter-violence among Muslims, between those who control the state and those who are in opposition, the one common element has been the appeal to Islam as Muslims have engaged in the killings of Muslims. The abuse of religion in such a manner is not confined to Muslims only; Christians have their own history of violence. But the intensity and persistence of Muslim violence against Muslims – the intra-Christian violence is now an exception when it occurs and not the norm – requires an explanation. Muslims need to confront their record on this matter, if they are going to break out of this cycle, by acknowledging the problem, understanding what are the sources of such violence, and then engaging in that brand of politics which will guide them into a democratic future and allow them to construct an alternative vision of Islam than the one that has been so destructive and counter-productive in the making of their history.

In all of the violence and counter-violence among Muslims, between those who control the state and those who are in opposition, the one common element has been the appeal to Islam as Muslims have engaged in the killings of Muslims.

I return to the example of Pakistan. Any description of Pakistan's history will need to take account of its making; of the prior history of Muslims and Islam in India; of the failure right at the outset in constitution-making and the transformation of Pakistan into a praetorian state; of its ethnic divisions; and of the causes leading to the break up of the country. What followed was the subsequent history of internal strife, the program of Islamization, sectarian violence, the war in Afghanistan and the Talibanization of Pakistan.¹

A detailed description of these events is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I will limit myself to the proposition that the record thus far of Pakistan as a Muslim majority country, its state of unsettled politics with accompanying violence of Muslim against Muslims, is bound by the history of its founding.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision for Pakistan was based on his "two-nation" theory that Muslims of India constitute a nation, separate and distinct from non-Muslim Indians. It was an unprecedented innovation in Muslim history. This invention of a *nation* caught hold of the imagination of a sufficiently large number of Indian Muslims and the religious nationalism that followed led to the division of India.²

Jinnah's demand did not go unchallenged by those Indian Muslims who viewed the idea of a separate Muslim state as impractical, and its consequences hugely tragic for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. A majority of Indian Muslim scholars, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad belonging to the Indian National Congress being most prominent among them, repudiated Jinnah's nationalist claim as being contrary to the traditional teachings of Islam and argued that the history of Muslims in India did not warrant such a division of a country that had been their *watan*, home, for over a thousand years.³

Jinnah prevailed, and those Muslims who followed him turned their backs on a history of Hindu-Muslim coexistence that represented for Muslims of India an alternative to the politics of exclusion and separation within a religiously defined nationalism. The politics of Muslims opting for Pakistan had a broader implication for Muslim history beyond the Indian subcontinent; such separatism suggested that

for Muslims the idea of coexistence as a minority with a non-Muslim majority was untenable, – that Muslims as a minority population preferred separating from non-Muslims within an existing larger political territory to form a majority in a smaller political territory – when the global reality is Muslims are a minority in the world at large as they were within India, and the main challenge confronting them politically and culturally remains that of coming to terms with the modern world in all its complexity.

The demand for Pakistan was accompanied with the battle cry that “Islam is in danger within a Hindu majority India.” The politics of the “two-nations” theory was laden with emotionalism, and the partition of India exploded in an unprecedented explosion of communal carnage. Once the dust settled, the question of what sort of state Pakistan would be, an Islamic state or a secular-national Muslim majority state, emerged as a highly divisive issue.

Jinnah interestingly observed in a speech delivered a few days before the date of formal independence of Pakistan, that in the new state “Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”⁴ Jinnah’s thinking was remarkable given the carnage his “two-nations” theory had wrought, but he died a year later and those who had been mobilized in the name of Islam were not prepared to see their sacrifices denied. The struggle to make Pakistan an Islamic state began with the first sitting of the Constituent Assembly.

The initial confrontation between the defenders of Jinnah’s legacy and the proponents of Islamic state took place over the demand made by religious parties, most notably the Jamaat-i-Islami of Maulana Maududi, to declare Ahmadis, a relatively new sect in Islam, as being non-Muslims. The anti-Ahmadiyya movement became violent and led to the imposition of martial law in Lahore and adjoining areas of Punjab in 1953. It was the precursor of what would follow in terms of sectarian violence and ethnic conflict leading eventually to the crisis of 1971.

The word “Pakistan” interestingly means “the land of the pure.” Pure here signifies Muslims being pure in their monotheistic faith. The sub-text of the Pakistan movement was the many-layered meaning of “Islam in danger.” It meant the Muslim minority community in a Hindu majority India was vulnerable to the creeping impurity of polytheism undermining their faith. There were moments in the long history of Muslims in India when the cry of “Islam in danger” was used by Muslim rulers to consolidate their power against rivals as Aurangzeb, the Mughal prince and later emperor, did in his bid for power against his brothers; or such a cry was raised by religious leaders against a Muslim ruler who seemed to be too accommodating of Hindus as was Akbar, the Mughal emperor, renowned for his openness to all faiths in his empire.⁵

Once Pakistan was attained, the demand for an Islamic state also meant to keep the country “pure” and uncontaminated by alien impurities. The anti-Ahmadiyya movement was indicative of this mind-set, and eventually the Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims. The same sort of thinking went into describing one group of Muslims being ethnically purer than another on the basis of geographical location, or origin, of ethnicity being close to or distant from Arab lands. In this scheme of purity and impurity, the faith of Bengalis was held suspect since their language was Sanskrit in origin and did not belong to the family of languages, Arabic-Persian-Urdu, considered Islamic, and the ethno-geography of Bengali Muslims was furthest in the Indian subcontinent from Arab lands.⁶ Hence the military campaign in East Pakistan in 1971 was justified by Pakistani authorities in religious and racial terms, that the faith of Bengali Muslims was doubtful since they were converts from Hinduism, and they were racially inferior as a people to those Pakistanis who claimed belonging to martial races as descendants of Arabs, Persians, Turks and Afghans.⁷

The violence surrounding the effort to make Pakistan an Islamic state, whether initiated by

religious parties challenging the authority of those who viewed themselves as heirs to Jinnah's quest to make the country a modern nation-state, or resulting from the effort of those in power as in the case of General Zia ul-Haq's program of Islamization, is indicative of an absence of consensus on what is meant by an Islamic state. One of the most fascinating records of probing into the thinking of those demanding an Islamic state is provided in the *Report of the Court of Inquiry into the Punjab Disturbances of 1953*, also known as the *Munir Report* after Justice Munir who headed the inquiry. The Court of Inquiry engaged in questioning all the leading religious leaders involved in the agitation against the Ahmadis, and in its Report concluded that on the question of what constitutes an Islamic state, of how it would be instituted and governed, there existed much confusion among those who were its most determined proponents. Justice Munir wrote: "If there is one thing which has been conclusively demonstrated in this inquiry, it is that provided you can persuade the masses to believe that something they are asked to do is religiously right or enjoined by religion, you can set them to any course of action, regardless of all considerations of discipline, loyalty, decency, morality or civic sense." These words were remarkably prescient of things to come in Pakistan, and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

How are we to explain Muslim violence against Muslims within the framework of Islam and Muslim history? The task is not difficult, but there is peril in pursuing such an explanation. The task of re-reading Muslim history, specially the earliest years of the post-Prophetic period, is not one of retrospectively reading our standards into what was narrated in the formative period, but finding clues in that narrative to explain the subsequent development of Muslim politics into our time. The peril in this endeavor is in running afoul of those Muslims, a great majority, who view the history of early Islam and Muslims as sacred and closed to any further interpretation apart from that provided by Muslims most proximate to that period.

But the earliest narrators of Arab-Muslim history were not reluctant to record events surrounding the lives of the Prophet and his companions and of the difficulties and conflicts encountered in their effort to establish Islam among their people. These narrators, most notable among them, for instance, are Ibn Ishaq (d. 761), Bukhari (d.870), Muslim (d. 875) and al-Baladhuri (d. c.892), provided the raw material for those who came later and sought to systematize the historical record and provide commentaries of their own on the earliest developments of Arab-Muslim history and Islamic civilization. The voluminous writings of al-Tabari (d. 923) remain a unequal resource for all subsequent historians – for instance the celebrated philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), in their efforts to understand and interpret the formative period of Islam between 632, the year of the Prophet's demise in Medina, and 680, the year of Husain's martyrdom at Karbala in Iraq.

The record of this earliest period of Arab-Muslim history is troubling to most Muslims, and the best they can do is gloss over it, remain silent, or reach for no judgment. But without unraveling the record of this period and making an effort to critically understand what it tells us, Muslims will remain stuck in apologetics, or worse denial. The recent work of Wilferd Madelung, based on the earliest available records and later commentaries, in analyzing the violent nature of the succession struggle that followed the demise of the Prophet is a most welcome effort in shedding light on that period with tools of modern historiography.⁸

The history of Pakistan is indicative of the causes of Muslim violence against Muslims. In the first instance there is the appropriation of religion for politics, of bending faith for power, and then the rest follows. In the ascribing of ethnicity in politics we may note the flavor of tribalism; in the arguments over purity of faith among Muslims we may discern the custom of establishing genealogical connections among believers of their respective closeness and distance to the Prophet; and in the securing or denial of authority to rule we find the appeal to Islam and the preparedness to use violence against opponents as the one constant theme of politics in Muslim history right from the beginning of the post-Prophetic period.

The Prophet of Islam's death was barely announced when the struggle to succeed him as the temporal leader of a community defined by faith emerged among his followers. Muhammad had renewed the faith of Abraham in One God among Arabs of the desert. In the process of rekindling the faith of Abraham, to be known as Islam, Muhammad had established a state, and made of Muslims a political community.

While returning to Medina from his farewell pilgrimage to the *Ka'aba* in Mecca, Muhammad addressed his followers for the last time and told them, as narrated by Ibn Ishaq, the earliest biographer of the Prophet from the 8th century, "Know that every Muslim is a Muslim's brother, and that the Muslims are brethren." The message was unambiguous, that Islam had cut loose the tribal bonds of the age of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) and replaced them by a new fraternity of a universal faith. Then he halted at a place called Ghadir al-Khumm and taking Ali, his cousin and son-in-law by hand, he gathered all his companions and prayed, "O God, be the friend of him who is his friend, and the foe of him who is his foe." Once again the message was clear, that the Prophet was indicating to his followers his affection for one he considered to be nearest to him, and that he felt the need to make a public show of this affection because of some dissatisfaction towards Ali he had observed. Then some time later in Medina the Prophet fell ill, requested Abu Bakr to lead the public prayers in his place, his illness took a turn for the worse and he died while being tended by his wife A`isha.

Right at the beginning of the post-Prophetic period in the history of Islam and Muslims there was a fork on the road, and the manner in which the path to go ahead was chosen selecting Abu Bakr as the successor of the Prophet of God, *Khalifat Rasul Allah*, was burdened with grief and discontent. The events at the portico of the Banu Sa`idah – where the *Ansars*, Helpers, who had welcomed the Prophet to their midst in Medina when he fled from Mecca into exile, made a bid for electing one of their own to authority and then were defeated by the claims made by Umar and Abu Bakr on behalf of the *Muhajiruns*, Emigrants from Mecca, that appointed Abu Bakr as the *khalif* – laid the seeds of Muslim violence against Muslims by dividing the community of believers the Prophet had brought together.

An axiom of Muslim belief is that the Prophet's life is a resplendent example for believers to emulate. It means taking every aspect of the Prophetic conduct as a lesson to be reflected upon and followed. During his lifetime all the wars the Prophet engaged in were between believers put under duress by non-believers, and he set the modality of settling differences among believers through consultation and mediation. He consulted widely among his companions, and the message of Islam forbade a believer from killing another believer at the risk of damnation as a punishment for the transgressor. He united Arabs of the desert under his divinely guided leadership, yet the question remains: was this unity the foundation for a state as we understand it – of authority in Islam representing the joining of religion and politics (*din wa siyasa*) as it was constructed in the post-Prophetic period by his immediate successors – or was this unity a unique function of the Prophet limited to his person. The striving of his successors to emulate him in authority could only be emulation, and not an article of faith for posterity. Moreover, there is the tantalizing possibility that the Prophet indicated the realm of religious quest for God stands physically apart from the realm of politics by his decision to return to Medina after the conquest of Mecca, instead of establishing Mecca – the City of God and the spiritual centre of Islam – as the political center of Islam by once again taking residence in the city of his ancestors and of his birth.

During the first fifty years of the post-Prophetic period in Muslim history, bracketed by the events in the portico of Banu Sa`idah even as the Prophet awaited burial (632) and the brutal killing of Husain, son of Ali and the grandson of the Prophet from his daughter Fatimah at Karbala in Iraq (680), the template of Muslim politics that remains dominant in practice was fashioned.

In this period the extraordinary departure took place from what was forbidden and scrupulously

followed during the lifetime of the Prophet, the ban on Muslim violence against Muslims. There followed the wars or campaigns against apostasy; the first civil war after the murder of Uthman, the third *khalif*; the disputed leadership of Ali, the fourth *khalif*, and his murder; the political triumph of the clan of the Abdu Shams, to which Abu Sufyan belonged, over the clan of Hashim, to which the Prophet belonged; the transformation of a consensus-based leadership of the Muslim community into a Roman-Byzantium type dynastic rule, and its most significant first victims were Husain and his family, the direct descendants of the Prophet.

All of this took place even as the message of the Prophet, Islam, was glorified and the physical boundaries of Islam were rapidly extended beyond the confines of Arabia into Palestine and Syria, into Africa, and into Persia. But there was a huge disconnect between the expansion of Islam and the evolving nature of leadership among Muslims. The tribe prevailed over the fragile bonds of fraternity based on faith that the Prophet spoke about in his farewell message, and what emerged and became consolidated over the years, was politics of the tribe. The fusion of religion and politics was in effect religion providing legitimacy to tribal authority. Rulership over Muslims required reference to Islam; consequently, there emerged an “official” Islam as a legitimating function of the tribal ruler and, inevitably, an “Islam” of the opponents of those in power.

Muslims in general have refused to critically examine this period to understand how the evolution of their history was shaped by events of those fifty years. Instead a culture of denial took shape, and the majority of Muslims have continued to live in a traditional world of politics where tribal instincts of clan solidarity prevail and politics is predominantly a calculus of honour-shame that binds one clan, one tribe, one nation against another. In tribal politics an individual is inconsequential, and the highest regard is placed for maintaining the collective reputation of the tribe in respect to other tribes. This politics of denial and of group solidarity allowed the murder of Husain and his family go unanswered might be labelled as the Karbala Syndrome.

Ibn Khaldun wrote his penetrating works on the philosophy of history some 700 years after Karbala. In *Al-Muqaddimah* he offered his theory of *`asabiya*, or group solidarity, to explain the rise and fall of Arab dynasties. In Aziz Al-Azmeh’s reading of Ibn Khaldun, there is a teleological destiny of *`asabiya* to establish rule of the group, the clan, the tribe over others: “the subjugation to its will of an ever-widening circle of groups with a progressively more obscure and higher tie of kin to the central group which is exercising leadership, a subjugation as if by suction into a vortex whose centre is progressively elevated from headship to kingship to the state.”⁹ This is a fine description of the *`asabiya* of Saddam Hussein and his Tikriti clan that squeezed Iraq and its people for all their worth.

In Ibn Khaldun’s view the transformation of the office of the successors to the Prophet, the *khalifat*, into kingship occurred as a natural decline in the quality of faith among believers and the compensating increase of *`asabiya*. Ibn Khaldun wrote: “A change became apparent only in the restraining influence that had been Islam and now came to be group feeling and the sword... Then, the characteristic traits of the caliphate disappeared, and only its name remained. The form of government came to be royal authority pure and simple.”¹⁰ The Quran is, however, categorical about the nature of faith among the Arabs of the desert (49:14). The Quran declared that the desert Arabs merely submitted to the reality of power, since faith had not penetrated their hearts.

Those among believers who understood Islam as an inner journey towards God gradually distanced themselves from the world of power and politics. They came to be known as *sufis* by reference to their simple garments of wool (*suf*), and through their efforts Islam was carried deep into the lands of Asia and Africa.¹¹ The spread of Islam in India, for instance, was more the work of *sufis* than men who wielded swords.

The nature of rulership that emerged in the early post-Prophetic period, despite the terribly bloody history of the first fifty years following the demise of Muhammad, became the norm for all later generations of Muslims. Islam became politicized and corrupted to serve the needs of rulers unaccountable to Muslims, except those whose support was essential in the maintenance of *`asabiya* (group solidarity). A politicized Islam became a prescription for Muslim violence against Muslims. The history of Pakistan is indicative of this problem persisting into modern times.

The Karbala Syndrome prevents Muslims from confronting their unpleasant past, and this, in turn, prevents them from reforming their group behavior so as not to repeat the errors of the past. Reform hinges on a critical understanding of the past, but the Karbala Syndrome is the group behavior of denying the unpleasantness of the past, of escaping responsibility for history by blaming others.

In the years since 1971, no official effort of any public sort has been made in Pakistan to explain and understand the reasons for the break up of a country, nor any official apology has been given to the people of Bangladesh for the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military and its surrogates. The refusal to publicly acknowledge the events of 1971 is indicative of the Karbala Syndrome at work in the Pakistani society. The far more consequential harm to politics in the country from such a practice of group denial is the continuing inability of the people to reform their society in keeping with the demands of the modern world.

In conclusion, Muslim violence against Muslims is a symptom of politics whose origins may be traced back to the earliest years of the history of Islam and Muslims. This history became a closed cycle of group solidarity and tribal politics, and its victims continue to be Muslims who accept this history as the norm. An escape from this history is possible if Muslims can imagine what the alternative history of Islam and Muslims might have been if the successors to the Prophet had chosen a different path than the one that led from the portico of Banu Sa`idah to Karbala.

The nature of rulership that emerged in the early post-Prophetic period, despite the terribly bloody history of the first fifty years following the demise of Muhammad, became the norm for all later generations of Muslims. Islam became politicized and corrupted to serve the needs of rulers unaccountable to Muslims, except those whose support was essential in the maintenance of *`asabiya* (group solidarity). A politicized Islam became a prescription for Muslim violence against Muslims.

-
1. For an overview of Pakistan's history and politics, see Owen Bennet Jones, Pakistan: The Eye of the Storm. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002.
 2. On the making of Pakistan, see Khalid B. Sayeed, Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857-1948. London: Oxford University Press, 1968. Also H. Malik, Moslem Nationalism in India and Pakistan. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963.
 3. See Mushirul Hasan, Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997; see chapters 1-4.
 4. Cited in Stanley Wolpert, Jinnah of Pakistan, p. 340. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
 5. On the history of the Mughals see Abraham Eraly, The Last Spring: The Lives and Times of the Great Mughals. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997.
 6. On Muslims in Bengal, see R.M. Eaton, The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
 7. On 1971 see G.W. Choudhury, The Last Days of United Pakistan. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993. Also see Anthony Mascarenhas, The Rape of Bangla Desh. New Delhi: Vikas Publications, n.d.
 8. W. Madelung, The succession to Muhammad: A study of the early Caliphate. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
 9. Aziz Al-Azmeh, Ibn Khaldun, p. 32. London: Routledge, 1990.
 10. Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, p. 166. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal. Edited and abridged by N.J. Dawood. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 1967.
 11. See A. Schimmel, Islam in the Indian Subcontinent. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980.