THE CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES

By Richard Schifter

There was a great deal of hope in 1989 and 1990 that the world could finally look forward to a period of peace and tranquility. But this was not to be. We are once again in times of great international tension.

Some analysts of current events have spoken of a clash of cultures, of the rejection by non-Westerners of the attributes of Western culture, of a struggle that pits “the West against the rest” along the fault lines that separate one culture from another. That was indeed the argument that was advanced to me in 1991 by a Chinese official. A United States delegation had come to Beijing for a discussion of a variety of issues. Among them was the performance of China in the field of human rights in the wake of the Tienamen Square massacre. I was then serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs and in that capacity had come to engage the Chinese Foreign Ministry in a discussion of human rights conditions in China.

My discussion of human rights was held with an official with no particular background in the field, who had evidently been selected to meet with me merely as an accommodation to our wish to discuss human rights in Beijing. In that discussion I most certainly did not get any meaningful response to the points I raised. Once we had gone through the ritual of a meeting, my Chinese opposite number and I walked to the large hall where the plenary session under the leadership of the Chinese Foreign Minister and the United States Secretary of State was to take place. As we awaited the arrival of the other participants in the meeting, my new Chinese friend offered some informal comments on the conversation that we had just completed. “What you are trying to do,” he told me, “is impose Western ideas on China. That won’t work.”

I responded by saying to him that as I saw it, the West had given rise in the last two-hundred and fifty years to two different sets of ideas about the structure of government, namely the idea of liberal democracy that was the product of the Enlightenment, and Marxism-Leninism. “Your trouble,” I said to the Chinese official, “is that you picked the Western system that does not work. Look at the success of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan. And in the United States students with Chinese names can often be found at the top of the lists of high school and college graduates. It is Leninism that’s holding you back.” It is worthy of note that in the years since my conversation, a great deal of Marxism-Leninism has ended up on the Chinese ash heap of history.

My Beijing experience contrasted sharply with another meeting I had that same year: a meeting in my office in Washington with a delegation from one of China’s neighbors, Mongolia. The Mongolian Communist government had fallen the previous year. I had been astounded by the changes that had occurred in Mongolia in 1990, when this theretofore highly centralized Communist state installed its first freely elected government. That this should have happened in a country wedged between the Communist Soviet Union and Communist China, far away from the centers of democratic thought, was truly amazing. My first questions to the delegation were, therefore: “What happened in your country? How did the idea of democracy get to you?”
I received a clear answer. “We sent our best students to foreign universities, but we could send them only to the universities of countries friendly to the Soviet Union. So they went to Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest. They saw the changes there and came back with ideas about freedom.”

It is thus evident that the fault lines of civilizations did not stop the ideas of freedom from vaulting across these fault lines to land in Ulan Bator. Nor have these fault lines prevented the gradual thawing of the Chinese system, which is now most certainly quite different from the dictatorship of Mao-Tse-Tung. And then let us also consider the many other major countries that now subscribe to liberal democracy even though they are non-Western: India, Japan, South Africa. Democracy also prevails in many smaller non-Western countries, such as South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Benin, Botswana, Ghana, and Namibia.

By contrast, the severest attacks on the ideology of the Enlightenment, as it evolved in recent centuries in the West, has come from within Western culture, first from Fascism and National Socialism and then from Communism. As distinct from earlier wars, wars that had been fought over access to resources and over territory, the Second World War and the Cold War were based on fundamental ideological differences. They were attacks by totalitarian movements against the ideas of the Enlightenment. Liberal democracy ultimately prevailed in both of these worldwide struggles, only to be faced by what can appropriately be characterized as the third totalitarian attack, an attack that began as a civil war within Islamic space, between Islamic advocates of modernity and their opponents, a war that has only relatively recently spilled over into other parts of the world.

We need to keep in mind in this context that the present attack from Islamic space on enlightened thought is by no means attributable to an ideological outlook inherent in Islam. On the contrary, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, while the West still lived through the period now known as the Dark Ages, the Islamic world was pre-eminent in the fields of philosophy, literature, and science. It was Islam that brought a benign and tolerant social organization to the region that it dominated, in striking contrast to the feudal system that condemned the West to darkness, misery, and ignorance.

And it was through interaction with the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world that knowledge of ancient Greece and its philosophers and of more recent advances in learning reached the Western world and stimulated the Renaissance. But it was not until after the invention of the printing press and the general availability of translations of the Bible that some persons in the West began to subscribe to the notion that the power of kings was not absolute, that it was constrained by the law. Thus, only after it had been seeded by the writings of the ancient Greeks and the ancient Hebrews, did Western thinking in the direction of democracy gradually, very gradually evolve.

The basic precept of the divine-right monarchies, we need to keep in mind, was that the king can do no wrong. But many of those who were concerned about the exercise of absolute authority were by the beginning of the Sixteenth Century able to read the Bible in the vernacular. They noted that Deuteronomy, chapter 17, verse 18, prescribed that the king shall have a copy of the law, which “he must read every day of his life,… and keep all the words of this law and observe these laws, that his heart not be lifted up above his brethren and he will not swerve right nor left from these commandments, to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom.” The inference that some Europeans and later Americans drew from this Biblical passage was that kings who swerved right or left from the commandments would not see their days in the kingdom prolonged. On the contrary, their days as kings
would be cut short. This was a concept that brought back to life principles that had been spelled out in the Magna Carta of 1215 but had since then been shunted aside.

The biblical words were most likely on the minds of the Dutch revolutionaries who in 1581 declared their independence from Spain. In their Declaration of Abjuration they spelled out their rejection of the basic premises of absolute monarchy and thus laid the foundation for modern democratic thought. With the biblical notion evidently in mind that a king must obey the law to prolong his days in his kingdom, they said this about the rule of Philip II:

“As it is apparent to all that a prince is constituted by God to be ruler of a people, to defend them from oppression and violence as the shepherd his sheep; and whereas God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his commands, whether right or wrong, but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects (without which he could be no prince), to govern them according to equity, to love and support them as a father his children or a shepherd his flock, and even at the hazard of life to defend and preserve them. And when he does not behave thus, but, on the contrary, oppresses them, seeking opportunities to infringe their ancient customs and privileges, exacting from them slavish compliance, then he is no longer a prince, but a tyrant, and the subjects are to consider him in no other view. And particularly when this is done deliberately, unauthorized by the states, they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another prince for their defense. This is the only method left for subjects whose humble petitions and remonstrances could never soften their prince or dissuade him from his tyrannical proceedings; and this is what the law of nature dictates for the defense of liberty, which we ought to transmit to posterity, even at the hazard of our lives.”

This passage appears to be the first clear enunciation by a Western state, in fact a state in revolt against another Western state, of the fundamental principles of modern democracy.

In succeeding years the Netherlands became truly the cradle of that new ideology. It took more than a century for the ideas that were incubated and then hatched in the Netherlands to spread across the North Sea to Britain and from there to North America. And only in the second half of the 19th Century, in the wake of the revolutionary year of 1848, did constitutional monarchies finally become the prevailing form of government in the West. The democratic cause was not carried forward by the sword, by military conquest. What we can see here is that ideas have wings that allow the seed of democracy to be transported peacefully across borders.

In the Twentieth Century the concepts of the Enlightenment also penetrated the world of Islam. Intellectuals in the Islamic world came to accept that ideology and sought to fashion governments and societies in their countries along the democratic model. But they found themselves opposed by fellow-Muslims that rejected that model. These opponents of democracy developed a revolutionary, totalitarian movement, which, they contended, reflected the Muslim religion in its purest form. Their totalitarian movement has variously been called “Islamism,” “Political Islam” or “Militant Islam.” It is not the role of outsiders to decide what is or is not the proper interpretation of the Islamic faith. But we can note that a great many Muslims do not subscribe to Militant Islam.

All three totalitarian movements, Nazism/Fascism, Communism, and Islamism are or were millenarian movements with worldwide aspirations. Hitler spoke of the Thousand-Year Reich, of a German
superpower that will dominate the world. Mussolini dreamed of recreating the Roman Empire. The Communists spoke of attainment of the goal of a worldwide communist society. And the Islamists speak of a return to the Caliphate of the Eighth Century that will ultimately dominate the world. Each of these movements believes that it has possession of the whole truth and that it must suppress all dissenting views. Nazism differed from the others in that its vision limited the ruling group to persons of so-called Nordic descent. Communism and Islamism accepted and accept converts from differing backgrounds as long as they are prepared to subscribe fully to all tenets of these respective faiths.

The seeds for the Islamist movement were planted at a time when the Western totalitarian anti-Enlightenment movements were flourishing. It was in 1928 that an Egyptian schoolteacher, Hassan al-Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood. Mussolini had seized power six years earlier. And Hitler was to take power five years later. The founders of the Muslim Brotherhood believed that the Islamic countries should emulate what they considered to be these vital new forces, the wave of the future, rather than imitating what they viewed as the decadent cultures of the dominant democratic states, Britain and France or to go along, as some of their political competitors did, with the Communist model.

Like other Egyptian political parties, the Brotherhood opposed the British colonial presence. But unlike most of them it opposed Egypt’s effort to adopt the democratic model as a substitute for colonial rule and called instead for the abolition of the Egyptian nation state and its incorporation into a large Islamic state governed by Shari’a, the Muslim code of law. The principal target against which Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood directed its attack was, therefore, the Government of Egypt, which was then a monarchy.

While al-Banna was engaged in building the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, another effective speaker and organizer, al-Mawdudi, advocated similar anti-democratic views among the Muslims of the Dominion of India. His efforts gave rise to the Jaamat-I Islam movement in what is now Pakistan. In both settings the movement did not stem from the poor and downtrodden but like Nazism and Communism, from reasonably well-educated members of the middle class.

To return to Egypt: the Muslim Brothers soon began to commit acts of violence against government officials in an effort to gain power. The Government responded with repressive measures and, in 1949, arranged for the assassination of al-Banna. Though the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown in 1953, adverse relations between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian Government did not change. On the contrary, after Nasser assumed full power in 1954, the sharp confrontations between the Brothers and the Government increased in vehemence. Finally, subjected to the severely repressive measures of the Nasser Government, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood dropped violence from its agenda. But when it did, it also spawned newly formed Islamist organizations, committed to the exercise of terror.

As the other totalitarian movements rose and ultimately fell, Islamism started to grow and spread throughout the Islamic world. The Brothers became active in Syria and Jordan. Similar Islamist organizations were formed in the Sudan and the Maghreb countries – Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In due course the ideology spread also in the non-Arab states, beyond Pakistan to Iran, in the form of Khomeini’s new and revolutionary version of Shi’ism and more recently to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Muslim areas of the Philippines.

While occasionally resorting to violence and providing clandestine support to organizations engaged in violence, the mainstream Islamists tended to emphasize organization, ideological persuasion, and, in
support of these goals, engagement in charitable work. But, and that brings us to the problem of current concern, the movement had, as already noted, given birth to groups that are not only occasionally engaged in violence, but have made terror their full-time occupation.

We are here dealing with a phenomenon that developed in the last fifty years. Judith Miller, a New York Times correspondent who has studied the evolution of Islamism, has identified Sayyid Qutb, like al-Banna an Egyptian schoolteacher and a member of the Brotherhood, as the ideological father of Islamist terrorism. Qutb was known as a troublemaker. To get him out of Egypt for a while, his employer, the Ministry of Education, sent him to the United States in 1948. He returned home with a deep hatred for the United States and what he viewed as its materialism and sexual depravity. He developed similar views regarding Europe and thus the West in general, views that he set forth in a series of essays and books that were widely read. As he was also violently opposed to secular Arab nationalism, he resorted to terrorist measures against the Nasser government. He was arrested, tried and, in 1966, sentenced to death and executed.

But Qutb’s ideas, too, lived on. Here is how Judith Miller, in her book *God has Ninety-Nine Names*, [Judith Miller, *God has Ninety-Nine Names*, Simon & Schuster, 1996] sums up the impact of his writings:

“[T]he conceptual framework of radical Islam’s view of the West and of America – its rejection of the imitation by Arab regimes of Western systems and values and its … conclusion that every pious Muslim was religiously obliged to wage jihad against such … societies – became accepted militant dogma by the time the Jihad and Gama’a theoreticians began writing in the 1980’s. Those concepts are Sayid Qutb’s legacy to modern Islamic militancy, or ‘literalism,’ as a thoughtful Palestinian scholar prefers to call it. The words and phrases used are as old as Islam. Qutb’s inimitable contribution was to make them mean something supposedly authentic and traditional, but actually novel and radical.” [Miller, at p. 63.]

It is Qutb’s ideas that were translated into practice on September 11, 2001. But the majority of perpetrators were not Egyptians. They were Saudis. Where does Saudi Arabia fit into this analysis?

Let us note that the Islamists of al-Banna and even Qutb’s terrorists were members of a movement that was led by people who were well educated and lived in urban areas. They were very much in touch with the thinking of the Twentieth Century, and, as I noted earlier, were influenced by the totalitarian movements that had sprung up in Europe.

In 1928, when Hassan al-Banna founded the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the lands that four years later became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, were still home to wandering Bedouin tribes, centuries removed in their life style from that of the Egyptian Brothers. Mere decades earlier the Arabian Desert had still been divided into small sheikdoms, each ruled by a different family. But beginning in 1902, a very clever leader, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, had succeeded through force and persuasion to create a unified state. He reached his goal by continuing the alliance formed generations earlier between his family and the followers of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab.
Wahhab, an 18th Century religious reformer, had preached a belief of literal adherence to the words of the Koran and a puritanical lifestyle, rejecting music and dance and even children’s games. The followers of Wahhab were committed to the conversion of other Muslims to their interpretation of Islam, if necessary by force. And they were committed to hatred of all infidels.

Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud was a practicing Muslim but most certainly not a puritan. His descendants have followed in that tradition. Yet the arrangement that Ibn Saud made with the followers of Wahhab to take power over the peninsula has lasted. They were given extraordinary authority to control public behavior and education in the Kingdom and to this day possess that power.

This would have been immaterial if the Arabian Peninsula had remained the backwater that it was as late as 1940, out of touch with the modern world. But from the end of World War II onward the extraction and sale of oil turned this backward country into a major player on the international scene. Awash in oil revenue, Saudi Arabia and its leading citizens could fund major programs of special interest to them. Among the programs that were funded by Saudi Arabia were those dear to the Saudi family’s Wahhabi partners, programs to educate Muslim boys in other countries in the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Schools throughout the Muslim world were recipients of Saudi beneficence.

As I have pointed out, the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, an interpretation of religious rigidity, was the product of the Arabian Desert. It focused principally on the people who inhabited the desert and on the conversion of fellow-Muslims in Arabia to Wahhabism. Infidels were rejected without much knowledge of their way of life and without much attention to them if they lived outside Arabia. The Islamism of al-Banna, on the other hand, has a worldwide sweep. It was the product of urban sophistication and, as noted earlier, had as its political goal the dissolution of the Muslim nation states and the creation of a single caliphate. The adherents of this movement are fully aware of the way of life of the infidels and are particularly focused on rejection of that way of life. The Muslim Brotherhoods developed without reference to the Wahhabis and, for a long time, had no contact with them.

And then, about twenty years ago, along came Osama bin Ladin. He was not the founder of a movement, nor was he an eloquent leader. He has been a highly competent organizer. He was, of course, well aware of the theology of the Wahhabis of his own country and of the Wahhabi educational network beyond Saudi Arabia’s borders. He was, at the same time, in contact with the adherents of Islamist terrorism in Egypt and elsewhere. His very significant contribution was to weave these two strands together and form the international network that initially focused on support for the Afghans fighting against Soviet occupation. Then, firm in the belief that he and his associates had brought about the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, bin Ladin declared war against liberal democracy in general and its leading exponent, the United States, in particular.

In the case of Afghanistan, Muslims were fighting against non-Islamic rule over an Islamic country. But why did Osama bin Ladin and his group decide to strike against the United States after the United States had been of significant help in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan? I believe the reason was two fold. First it was believed that United States support helped maintain such non-Islamist governments as those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf emirates, and Jordan. A significantly weakened United States would no longer be able to support these governments, governments whose members were considered traitors. As a result an Islamist take-over could take place in the countries in question. Second, the Islamists saw the way of life of the Enlightenment, particularly as it has evolved in recent decades in the
United States, as a threat to their way of life. It is the penetration into their space, through various media of communication, of the idea of rationalism, of independent thought, of an open society, and above all, of the equality of women, that they find enormously threatening.

The concern over the role of women must not be underestimated. We have seen the treatment to which women were subjected in Afghanistan, to which women are still subjected in Saudi Arabia. During the years of the Algerian civil war, women in the professions, physicians and lawyers, were singled out by the Islamists for the most brutal murders.

I have heretofore mentioned Sayyid Qut’b, whose writings inspired those who formed the terrorist wing of the Islamist movement. Judith Miller points out that Qut’b was preoccupied by what he viewed as Western licentiousness. She quotes his book, Islam and the Problems of Civilization, in which he asks what should be done about America and the West given their “overwhelming danger to humanity….” His answer is: “Should we not issue a sentence of death? Is this not the verdict most appropriate to the nature of the crime?” [Miller, at pp. 62-63.]

But what is the crime? The crime is the status of equality increasingly accorded to women in democratic countries. What stands out in the ideology of Militant Islam is its commitment to the subjugation of women. It is the keystone of that ideology, just as antisemitism was the keystone of Nazism, and the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and distribution the keystone of Communism. This concern over the role of women should not obscure the basic structure of the political system that Islamists seek to establish. It is a totalitarian structure, which negates individual rights, insists on a rigidly controlled society, and vests supreme authority in a self-selected leadership group whose interpretation of God’s will is binding in every detail on those who follow its commands.

How does the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fit into this picture? It is undoubtedly a factor in the formation of anti-American attitudes in the Islamic world, but it is not the central reason to the creation of the Islamist movement. Islamists, who hate the West for the ideological reasons that I have here identified, use the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to advance their cause. However, even if the Jewish state had been established in Patagonia, Madagascar, or Uganda, as had at one time or another been suggested, the underlying ideological conflict between Militant Islam and liberal democracy would still be with us.

This conclusion is fully supported by the historical evidence of the evolution of the Islamist movement. When the Muslim Brotherhood was founded, in 1928, Zionist aspirations in the Palestinian Mandate may have been of concern to Arab residents of the Mandate, but there is no indication that the Brothers paid a great deal of attention to it. They wanted to oust King Fuad. Later, when the terrorist offshoots developed, these terrorists directed their attacks toward an enemy of Israel, Gamal Abdel Nasser. And it was Nasser who had the chief ideologist of the movement, Sayyid Qutb executed. In 1982 it was the military forces of Hafez Assad of Syria, surely no friend of Israel, that killed an estimated 15,000 people in Hama in a major confrontation with the Islamists. Nor did Israel and the Jews play a role in the civil war that raged in Algeria in the early 1990’s between the Government and the Islamists.

Militant Islam has thus been engaged in a violent struggle against Arab governments for decades. It is this civil war that spilled over, first in attacks on American installations in the Arab world and African countries, and on September 11, 2001 in an attack on the United States. While the creation of a Palestinian state could improve relations between the State of Israel and many Palestinians, Militant
Islamists will continue to insist on the total abolition of Israel, which they call the crusader state, an irony given the role of the crusaders in the slaughter of European Jewry. Moreover, the end of Israel’s existence will not satisfy those who consider the West in general and the United States in particular a major threat to their way of life. Their ultimate goal remains the re-establishment of the Caliphate.

I have used the phrase “the West in general and the United States in particular.” This phrase gets us to the question of the relationship between the United States and the European Union at this juncture in history. Americans, overwhelmingly, want to join hands with Europe. But is the reverse true? Europe, after centuries of armed conflicts between its nation states, has finally united and is simply tired of warfare. We need to note that the people of the United Kingdom and France approved of the actions of Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier when they signed the Munich Agreement. It was President Roosevelt, by contrast, who had earlier called for a “quarantine of aggressors.” Similarly in the effort to withstand the aggressive policies of the Soviet Union, it was the United States that was out in front, although at the end of the day we had the support of our European friends. Now again, it is the United States that is prepared to take responsibility for leadership in the fight against terrorism inspired by the ideology of Militant Islam.

The totalitarian Communist system ultimately came to an end in a peaceful manner, when the people ruled by that system replaced it. Is there not good reason to believe that the problem of totalitarian Islamism can also be resolved from within the Islamic world, by Muslims who want to live in an open society? Today, in Iran, the great majority of the population is increasingly opposed to the rule of the mullahs. Polls show that the United States, which opposes the regime of the mullahs, is quite popular among young Iranians, who are a majority of the population.

It is with these developments and potential developments in mind that we of the West need to send a message of support, a united message, to those who genuinely favor freedom in the Muslim world, just as we sent such messages to dissidents in the Soviet bloc. We can and should provide moral support and, when appropriate, material help to the proponents of basic principles of freedom and human brotherhood and sisterhood in the Islamic world. We should, in particular, emphasize the right of women to equality. We should call attention to the teaching of inter-religious and inter-ethnic hatred in the schools dominated by Islamist thinking and urge change. We must see to it that support from Western sources of terrorist organizations and their allegedly charitable offshoots, is cut off. But all of these activities should be undertaken with the understanding that the ultimate solution to the problem that Militant Islam poses must come from within the Islamic world.

Richard Schifter, a lawyer by profession, has served in senior foreign policy positions in the U.S. Government, including that of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs.

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