



UNISCI Discussion Papers

ISLAM IN RUSSIAN AND WESTERN SECURITY STUDIES, 1980-2005

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Since the attacks upon the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001, the field of 'political Islam' in western security studies has grown enormously, with a fantastic number of books and articles published on topics such as the proper definition of *jihad*, the nature of Islamic fundamentalism, and the origins of Al Qaeda. Despite the great quantity of material published however, the vast majority of this work is marked by a striking thematic continuity, namely the 'problem' of Islam. Broadly defined, this whole genre boils down to a culturalist approach, in which the Muslim world is permanently defined by the manner in which it is not 'like us' (the West) and, correspondingly, by the manner that it *must* change. Thus, the most prominent recurring themes and titles have been 'Islam and Democracy' 'Islam and human rights', 'Transforming the Middle East', and 'The New Imperialism', whilst themes that do not fit into this neat security-orientated framework-Sufism, Islamic law, pilgrimage, social customs- have been deliberately ignored or marginalised. Bernard Lewis cleverly and cynically tapped into this new popular trend in his work entitled, with brilliant simplicity, 'What Went Wrong?'² Here Lewis deployed 'evidence' accumulated over an academic lifetime's worth of once-discredited Orientalism to portray the Middle East as hopelessly backward, decayed and stagnant, a picture eagerly grasped by a new generation of readers and policy-makers. Lewis' take was at once familiar and also superficially revitalized by contemporary events-put simply, backwardness breeds bombers, and the Arab races were culturally and intellectually incapable of grasping modernity. However, although Lewis is again influential, undoubtedly the *uber*-text of this whole genre, the work to which all others directly or indirectly refer, has been Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*.³ First published in the 1990s, Huntington's text has since been praised as prescient, particularly in American academic circles, where it served as a neat counter-argument in university curriculums to the intellectually more sophisticated but equally hollow *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama. The influence of this work has been particularly far reaching within the Islamic security genre as a whole. In a work that was itself praised as 'essential reading' by a retired US Army Colonel, *Islam at War* (note again the key-word title)

¹ Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

² Lewis, Bernard (2001): *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

³ Huntington, Samuel (1997): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London, Touchstone Books.



the whole dynamic of this genre is neatly summed up in a close fusion; an introduction blandly states that '[o]n September 11, 2001, America suddenly discovered the Islamic world', whilst the conclusion presents a dark and relentlessly Huntingtonian world view of a planet divided irreversibly into a *Dar al Islam* and *Dar al Harb*, where the only hope lies in the 'good ideas', the 'blue jeans and rock-n-roll' that, allegedly, defeated the Soviet Union.⁴ The overall emptiness and banality of such analysis scarcely needs comment; however such ill-informed judgements are not confined to one work but are, sadly, characteristic of much of the genre as a whole. Unsurprisingly perhaps, such slipshod intellectual trends spill over from security literature to infect actual policy formation on the ground itself in the 'war on terror.' To take just one example, John Jones, the chief of Middle Eastern security for KBR, the largest American private contractor in Iraq, commented that Iran is subsidizing unrest in Iraq in order to prevent the weakening of their own 'monarchy'. This was a statement repeated, unchallenged, in a recent American populist work on the aftermath of the Second Gulf War, which will undoubtedly in turn be read and accepted by large segments of the English-speaking western public.⁵ The fact that Iran at present possesses nothing resembling a monarchy, or that the last monarch of Iran was in fact a corrupt, American-subsidized despot matters little within this new, simplified dialogue of 'freedom' versus 'dictatorship.'

Though Islam has indeed been, to some degree, 'discovered' by Western security studies since September 11th 2001, the picture presented in such works of a militant and hostile Islam in fact traces its roots back directly to the late Cold War. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 27th 1979 presented for many a straightforward conflict between militant Communism and Islamism; in the eyes of certain Western security experts, Islam correspondingly became a weapon that could therefore be mobilized to bring about the downfall of the Soviet Union. The most prominent western writers advocating such a view were Alexandre Bennigsen, S. E. Wimbush and Marie Bennigsen Broxup. The guiding concept of this school rested upon a rather peculiar doctrine; that Sufism possessed the key to undermining Soviet power in the borderlands, but that Islam was also potentially a dangerous tool facilitating the expansion of Soviet Communism. The chief characteristic attributed to Islam in such works was the assumption that its followers followed the call of religious leaders mechanically, like automatons. This was precisely why Islam presented both an opportunity and a threat. Employed to Western ends, Islam could undermine the Soviet Union. A favourite historic example used to promote this thesis was the rebellion in the North Caucasus during 1920-21, a rebellion that, it was alleged, bore a striking resemblance to the then-current conflict in Afghanistan (when in fact it bore not the slightest resemblance at all). The North Caucasus revolt for this very reason was therefore, it was excitedly pointed out, a *verboden* subject in recent Soviet historiography. Bennigsen went so far as to use the example of the North Caucasus in 1920-21 as a model for making policy recommendations for the present. In one article that concluded by asking 'what lessons for the West?' from that period, Bennigsen pointedly remarked that:

In the 1920s domestic troubles in the Muslim territories of Soviet Russia weighed heavily on Soviet strategy in the Muslim world abroad. The Basmachis and the mountaineers made impossible any active Soviet intervention in Turkey and Iran. The same relationship between

⁴ Nafziger, George F. and Walton, Mark W. (2003): *Islam at War: a history*. Westport, Praeger, pp. vii, 261-2. The claim that simple 'blue jeans and rock-n-roll' defeated the Soviet Union would, at least, be of interest to members of the old Soviet military-industrial complex who witnessed at first hand the combined economic and political effects of attempting to stay in the Reagan-inspired arms race whilst simultaneously combating the American-funded Afghan *mujahedin*.

⁵ Moore, Robin (2004): *Hunting Down Saddam. The Inside Story of the Search and Capture*. New York, St. Martin's Press, p.135.



domestic and foreign problems exists today. Political tension in Central Asia and in the Caucasus would be the best deterrent against any Soviet adventure at large.⁶

This was an interventionists' charter, the explicit direct advocacy of a policy of covert foreign support based upon a malicious and misleading use of historical example. In indirect form it fed directly into the American-Pakistan support for the Afghan mujahedin during the 1980s that so distorted the structure of the Afghan resistance and bred malevolent effects still felt in that country even today.

However Islam within this earlier security formulation also posed a threat; the existence of a Soviet Muslim religious establishment presented the Soviet Union with what Bennigsen, S. E. Wimbush and their co-authors on one occasion labeled an 'Islamic Weapon' for spreading Soviet influence throughout the Third World.⁷ Their major work produced on this theme warned ominously that 'Soviet Islamic strategy is now of a greater scale and is more successful at enhancing Soviet influence and prestige in the Muslim world than is generally recognized,' and that 'a network of Muslim 'friends' of the USSR-usually respected individuals in their own countries-now covers the entire Muslim world.'⁸ In terms of the present security dialogue in the West over Islam, the heritage of past security studies trickling perniciously into the present could scarcely be any clearer. All the negative associations made with Islam made after 9/11 in Western security studies-of a political movement that is covert and unified, with the image of millions of fanatical Muslims implicitly encircling Western Europe-already existed, fully formulated, in this Cold-War model. To substitute Al Qaeda rather than the USSR as the malevolent mastermind and organizing force behind this scenario is only a single short step. Again, Islam through this security analysis was devalued from a real and complex phenomenon into a simple ideological 'weapon', implicitly possessing the power to drag millions of barely sentient believers in its wake, for good or ill. The 'Islamic weapon' was therefore presented as just another tool in the Soviet arsenal threatening the West, as menacing in its own way as Soviet SS-20 missiles or the arrayed tank armies of the Warsaw Pact. Religious belief itself had become a potentially potent threat in the same way as a tank or a gun, since it separated the believer from 'the West'; a Muslim could be either a dangerous opponent or a useful tool in regional politics, but he or she was certainly not an individual. Though ostensibly interested in liberating the peoples of the Soviet Union therefore, this 1980s security genre in fact presented a vision of Islam every bit as arcane and orientalist as that of any late Victorian author.

Although the space of this article does not permit a full survey or in-depth analysis, the French, German and Russian schools of Islamic studies in security affairs generally have enjoyed a better, more objective record than that of the English-speaking community, and carry many insights from which the genre-writers amongst the English-speaking peoples could profitably learn. Far from presenting Islam as a monolith, or as a simple 'weapon', the Russian, German and French schools have generally for a long time now acknowledged the complexity of the Islamic world. In 2002 Olivier Roy's sequel to his *The Failure of Political Islam*, entitled in English *Globalised Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*⁹ presented an oasis of calm in a sea of political alarmism, refusing to treat the Muslim world as anything other than a extremely complex and diverse phenomenon in which notions of identity and religiosity

⁶ Bennigsen, Alexandre: "Muslim Guerrilla Warfare in the Caucasus (1918-1928)", *Central Asian Survey*, 2 (1, 1983), p.55.

⁷ Bennigsen, A., Henze, Paul B., Tanham, George K. and Wimbush, S. Enders (1989): *Soviet Strategy and Islam*. London, Macmillan, pp.3-34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.3, 68.

⁹ Roy, Olivier (2004): *Globalised Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*. London, Hurst & Company.



were in a state of continual flux. Refusing to generalize or talk down to his readership, Roy presented a complex psychological picture, in which the West's endless desire to correlate culture with social behaviour (a process that started at least as far back as Max Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic*) was increasingly inappropriate within a globalised, deterritorialised world, a world in which Islam was often simply used by many as a label to express a wider sense of crisis. At the same time the Russian author V. O. Bobrovnikov's study of the North Caucasus, *Musul'mane Severnogo Kavkaza-obychai, pravo, nasilie* again stepped bravely beyond clichés about freedom-loving but savage Caucasus mountaineers to examine a complex ethnographic landscape through the prism of legal pluralism.¹⁰ Looking back at the manner in which law in the region had been treated and defined, Bobrovnikov (correctly in my view) regards the upheavals of recent times not as the prolongation of some semi-mythical '400-year war' between Russians and Chechens but as part of a process of modernization, in which the manner that land was defined and shared, amongst other factors, played a critical role. At the same time as Bobrovnikov produced his study, Valerii Tishkov continued his excellent ethnographic studies of ethnic conflict by looking specifically at Chechnya, examining both the myths and realities in that conflict.¹¹ Such studies provide a ray of hope that, in desperate time, Islam is not yet destined to remain in the ghetto of a 'security threat' but will still be studied as a diverse and fascinating phenomenon in its own right. Only by addressing the full complexity of security problems that are linked in some way with Islamic-practicing populations will we ever come any nearer practical solutions.

¹⁰ Bobrovnikov, V. O. (2002): *Musul'mane Severnogo Kavkaza Obychai Pravo Nasilie. Ocherki po istorii I etnografii prava Nagornogo Dagestana*. Moscow, Izdatel'skaia Firma "Vostochnaia Literatura" RAN.

¹¹ A revised and dramatically shortened English translation has recently been published: Tishkov, V. (2004): *Chechnya. Life in a War-Torn Society*. California: University of California Press.