Introduction

The shocking events of Tuesday 11 September 2001 once again threw the spotlight on a corner of the vast territory, large demography and rather unstable political geography of what we call the Muslim world. The Muslim world, comprising some 50 sovereign states and large minorities in many other countries, is a well-integrated and integral part of the modern world of states. It does, however, also contain a complex and intricate web of relations and forces which it periodically unleashes on the rest of the international system.

As we have witnessed, at times the points of contact have been surprisingly violent and dramatic. But on the whole, much of the energies of the Muslim world are either taken up with matters internal to that community or else used up by the individual Muslim states in their efforts to make way in today’s globalised socio-economic and cultural system. In this mode, I am often struck by how defensive the Muslim states are and how difficult they seem to find the struggle to defend their own interests. Little room is left for forging a concerted effort to defend what are regarded to be legitimate Muslim interests. It is in this relative vacuum that the radical Islamic forces find a role.

Learning from history

If we were to adopt a slightly longer-term view of the evolution of the Muslim world in the modern era, which indeed we must do if we are bent on making sense of the current crisis, then we can find many signs from pages of history which point to the deep structural flaws in the way in which the Muslim states emerged onto the international scene. It is my view that since the turn of the 20th century the Muslim world has been saddled by two fundamental problems.

First, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1920s, at one of the most important turning points in modern times, left it voiceless at the top table of international players. Without the shelter of that Islamic empire, which was not regarded as a perfect model by many Muslims outside Anatolia, the Muslim world found itself exposed and exploited by the bigger European powers such as Britain and France. This was after the humiliations which had followed Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the systematic weakening of the Persian and Ottoman empires in the face of European encroachments in the 19th century. European colonialism in the region was often brutal and has had a profound legacy in terms of both political institutions and culture.

The second problem was associated with the very nature of the state in the Arab and the wider Muslim worlds. The modern state in many parts of the Muslim world is not only largely a European creation, where even its boundaries are often those defined by the colonial powers, but one which is overwhelmingly reliant on a highly centralised state machinery and a patriarchal infrastructure. While the former has impregnated these states with a serious legitimacy problem, which was severely tested in the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1991 for example, the latter has made the elites of these countries more impervious to the calls of their citizens for a bigger share of the economic and political pie.

The deepening political and economic problems at home, brought about partly by corruption, nepotism and bad management,
and partly by the ill-defined goals of economic liberalisation and IMF-style structural adjustment, have enabled the radical Islamic forces — who have been able to flourish as other (more secular) political forces were marginalised or exterminated by the ruling elites — to step into the breach and challenge the rulers in the Muslim states. Their challenge is felt from Indonesia to Pakistan and Turkey, in the key Arab countries of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, as well as in the North African Muslim states of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya. Their slogan is a simple one: ‘Islam is the Solution’.

While for the most part the radical groups remained locked in a struggle with their own ruling regimes, with their quarrels largely confined to the territory of the country concerned, the Islamists are now increasingly finding themselves battling much greater outside forces. The infiltration of outside forces they view as beachheads for the ‘Americanisation’ of the Muslim way of life, as a bombardment of alien and corrupting values and influences. This, they believe, requires an international response, which partly explains the existence of international networks of Islamist groups.

Indeed, as the forces of globalisation — from the realm of commerce to those of television, food, clothes and the entertainment media — prize open the doors of traditional Muslim societies and challenge the norms and value systems of the local populations, so do they encourage the Islamist forces to act as defenders and protectors of the greater Muslim rights: to become the Muslim community’s latter-day cultural nationalists. In the face of the Islamists’ uncompromising claims to righteousness and protectors of the divine right, the rulers find themselves impotent to act and open to sharp criticism from their opponents for bowing to Western pressure or for harbouring pro-Western sentiments. They are, in short, accused of being ‘Westoxicated’ — a difficult label to shrug off if they are seen to be aiding the West in search of its own interests.

Sadly, as in today’s world the mediating power for the expression of frustration is nothing more articulate than the faceless force of globalisation itself, little chance of a genuine dialogue emerging between the parties seems likely. This much is depressingly clear in the aftermath of the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and Washington’s response to the bombings. The statement of the ‘Islamic International Front for Fighting Jews and Crusaders’, issued soon after the US missile attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan, sounded ominous: ‘Holy struggle operations will continue until American forces withdraw from the land of Muslims’.

The world has indeed entered a new age since the ascendency of the neo-conservative global vision in the United States in the new millennium. In this new world order, the ‘neo-cons’ find themselves lined up against the neo-fundamentalist forces of political Islam who look to the ‘golden age of Islam’ for reserve and inspiration. The two sides, adopting the crude tools of old missionaries, seem to relish the confrontation. In practice, the broad American neo-conservative agenda for global change has galvanised its opponents, from France and China to political Islam, into action.

As a consequence, so long as the forces of radical Islam interpret every American act as hostile and an attack on Islam they will rally against it, inevitably plotting a violent response. The cycle of violence deepens the more intensive the interactions become between the Muslim world and the political and commercial forces of the West. The image of the United States as the New Rome merely makes it easier for the radical Islamists to justify their own violent acts on the basis of the enemy’s threatening grand design.

In sum, it is reasonable to suggest that radical Islam has failed to gain state power, has failed in its main mission of ‘liberating’ Muslim lands from Western influence, and convince the Muslim masses of the virtues of its brand of jihad. But this is not the same as concluding that political Islam has lost the capacity to act, to remain militant, to undertake sophisticated military-style operations, or to generally pose a serious security challenge to Western interests worldwide.

As the West is now revisiting another corner of the Muslim world it is perhaps time to reflect on how the same forces of
globalisation have inadvertently invited into the arena actors who refuse to play by the established rules and are bent on breaking the norms. This is less a ‘clash of civilisations’ and more an encounter between forces which are resistant to the other’s ‘rules of the game’.