Inventing political violence
Mahmood Mamdani

America created violent political Islam inadvertently as part of its Cold War strategy, says Mahmood Mamdani -

 I was in New York City on 9/11. In the weeks that followed, newspapers reported that the Koran had become one of the biggest-selling books in American bookshops. Astonishingly, Americans seemed to think that reading the Koran might give them a clue to the motivation of those who carried out the suicide attacks on the World Trade Center. Recently, I have wondered whether the people of Falluja have taken to reading the Bible to understand the motivation for American bombings. I doubt it.

 Why the difference? I suggest we look at the nature of the public debate in America as a key ingredient in shaping public opinion.

 The post-9/11 public debate in the US has been inspired by two Ivy League intellectuals – Samuel Huntington at Harvard and Bernard Lewis at Princeton. From Huntington's point of view, the Cold War was a civil war within the west. He says the real war is yet to come. That real war will be a civilizational war, at its core a war with Islam. From this point of view, all Muslims are bad.

 Bernard Lewis, in contrast, makes a more nuanced claim. He says that there are good secular Muslims and bad fundamentalist Muslims, and that the west needs to distinguish between them. He identifies a secular point of view with western culture so completely that, for him, a secular Muslim is necessarily a westernized Muslim. A neoconservative guru, Lewis was a major inspiration behind the Iraq War.

 Their differences aside, Lewis and Huntington share two assumptions. The first is that the world is divided into two – modern and pre-modern. Modern peoples make their own culture; their culture is a creative act and it changes historically. In contrast, they assume that pre-modern peoples have an unchanging, ahistorical culture, one they carry along with them; they wear their culture as a kind of badge, and sometimes suffer from it like a collective twitch. The second assumption is that you can read people's politics from their culture. I call these two assumptions Culture Talk.

 The aftermath of the Iraq War has turned into a crisis for theory. It is increasingly clear that the designation of some Muslims as good and others as bad has little to do with their orientation to Islam, and everything to do with

their orientation to America. Simply put, good Muslim is a label for those who are deemed pro-American and bad Muslims are those reckoned anti-American. Culture Talk is not only wrong, it is also self-serving. How convenient it is to see political violence as something wrong with the culture of one party rather than an indication that something has gone wrong in the relationship between two parties.

Political Islam

Contemporary, modern political Islam developed as a response to colonialism. Colonialism posed a double challenge, that of foreign domination and of the need for internal reform to address weaknesses exposed by external aggression.

Early political Islam grappled with such questions in an attempt to modernize and reform Islamic societies. Then came Pakistani thinker Abu ala Mawdudi, who placed political violence at the centre of political action, and Egyptian thinker Sayyed Qutb, who argued that it was necessary to distinguish between friends and enemies, for with friends you use reason and persuasion, but with enemies you use force.

The terrorist tendency in political Islam is not a pre-modern carry-over but a very modern development.

Radical political Islam is not a development of the ulama (legal scholars), not even of mullahs or imams (prayer leaders). It is mainly the work of non-religious political intellectuals. Mawdudi was a journalist and Qutb a literary theorist. It has developed through a set of debates, but these cannot be understood as a linear development inside political Islam. Waged inside and outside political Islam, they are both a critique of reformist political Islam and an engagement with competing political ideologies, particularly Marxism-Leninism.

Let us remember that the period after World War II was one of a decades-long secular romance with political violence. Armed struggle was in vogue in national liberation and revolutionary movements. Many political activists were convinced that a thoroughgoing struggle had to be armed. The development of religious political tendencies that glorify the liberating role of violence is a latter-day phenomenon. Rather than a product of religious fundamentalism, it is best thought of as both religious and secular, a sign of the times.

The late Cold War

That said, we are confronted with a singular question: How did Islamist terror, a theoretical tendency that preoccupied a few intellectuals and was of marginal political significance in the 1970s, become part of the political mainstream in only a few decades? To answer it, we need to move away from the internal debates

of political Islam to its relations with official America, and back from 9/11 to the period that followed America's defeat in Vietnam, the period I call the late Cold War. My claim is also that this question is best answered from a vantage point inside Africa.

Decolonization reached a momentous point in 1975. The year the Americans were defeated in Vietnam was also the year the Portuguese empire collapsed in Africa. The result was a shift in the centre of gravity of the Cold War from south-east Asia to southern Africa. Who would pick up the pieces of the Portuguese empire in Africa, America or the Soviet Union?

The defining feature of the new phase of the Cold War was the strong anti-war movement within America opposed to direct military intervention overseas. Henry Kissinger, the US secretary of state, designed a strategy in response to the changed context: if America could not intervene overseas directly, it would intervene through others. Thus began the era of proxy war, one that was to mark the period from Vietnam to Iraq.

Angola was the first important American proxy intervention in the post-Vietnam period. Kissinger first looked for mercenaries to counter the independence movement in Angola, and then followed with a nod to apartheid South Africa. The South African intervention was discredited internationally as soon as it became public knowledge and led to a powerful anti-war response in Congress: the Clark Amendment terminated all assistance, overt and covert, to anti-communist forces in Angola.

The administration of Ronald Reagan raised proxy war from a pragmatic response to a grand strategy, called the Reagan Doctrine. Developed in response to two 1979 revolutions – those of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Islamists in Iran – the Reagan Doctrine made two claims. The first was that America had been preparing to fight the wrong war – that against Soviet forces on the plains of Europe – and meanwhile was losing the real war, that against Third World nationalism. Reagan called on America to fight the war that was already on, against yesterday's guerrillas now come to power. Arguing that there could be no middle ground in war, the Reagan administration portrayed nationalist governments newly come to power in southern Africa and central America as Soviet proxies that needed to be nipped in the bud before they turned into real dangers.

The Reagan Doctrine also turned on a second initiative, one that involved a shift from "containment" to "rollback", from peaceful coexistence to a determined, sustained and aggressive bid to reverse defeats in the Third World. To underline the historical legitimacy of this shift, it brought the language of religion into politics. Speaking before the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983, Reagan

called on America to defeat "the evil empire".

 Evil is a theological notion. As such, it has neither a history nor motivation. The political use of evil is two-fold. First, one cannot coexist with evil, nor can one convert it. Evil must be eliminated. The war against evil is a permanent war, one without a truce. Second, the Manichean battle against evil justifies any alliance. The first such alliance, dubbed "constructive engagement", was between official America and apartheid South Africa.

"Constructive engagement"

 It is through "constructive engagement" that official America provided political cover to apartheid South Africa as it set about developing a strategy for proxy war in the former Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola. As the Reagan administration moved from "peaceful coexistence" to "rollback", so the apartheid government redefined its regional strategy from "détente" to "total onslaught".

 The bitter fruit of constructive engagement was Africa's first genuine terrorist movement, called Renamo. Created by the Rhodesian army in the early 1970s and nurtured by the apartheid army after 1980, Renamo consistently targeted civilians in Mozambique to convince them that an independent African government could not possibly assure them law and order. At the same time, when terror unleashed by Renamo became the subject of public discussion, the apartheid regime explained it in cultural terms, as "black on black violence", as an expression of age-old tribal conflict, of the inability of black people to coexist without an outside mediator.

 America's responsibility for Renamo was solely political. But without an American political cover, it would have been impossible for apartheid South Africa to organize, arm and finance a terrorist movement in independent Africa for more than a decade – and to do so with impunity.

 Constructive engagement was a period of tutorship for official America. America created and wielded the Contras in Nicaragua just as apartheid South Africa did Renamo in south central Africa. Under CIA tutelage, the Contras blew up bridges and health centres, and killed health personnel, judges and heads of cooperative societies. The point of terror was not to win civilian support, but to highlight the inability of the government to ensure law and order. It was to convince the population that the only way to end terror was to hand over power to terrorists. This lesson in the electoral uses of terror was learnt by others, including Charles Taylor in Liberia and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone.

 It is worth drawing some lessons from the history of terror after Vietnam. Terror was a strategy America embraced when it had almost lost the Cold War in 1975.

Mozambique and Nicaragua were the founding moments of that history. Both Renamo and the Contras, the pioneer terrorist movements, were proxies of South Africa and America. Both were secular in orientation. The development of a religious proxy – terror claiming a religious justification – was characteristic of the closing phase of the Cold War in Afghanistan.

Rollback on a global scale: Afghanistan

The Afghan war was the prime example of "rollback". In the history of terror during the last phase of the Cold War, the Afghan war was important for two reasons. First, the Reagan administration ideologized the war as a religious war against the evil empire, rather than styling it a war of national liberation such as that it claimed the Contras were fighting in Nicaragua. In the process, the CIA marginalized every Islamist group that had a nationalist orientation, fearing that these groups might be tempted to negotiate with the Soviet Union, and brought centre-stage the most extreme Islamists in a partnership that would "bleed the Soviet Union white".

Second, the Reagan administration privatized war in the course of recruiting, training and organizing a global network of Islamic fighters against the Soviet Union. The recruitment was done through Islamic charities, and the training through militarized madrasahs. Unlike the historical madrasah, which taught a range of subjects, secular and religious, from theology and jurisprudence to history and medicine, the Afghan madrasah taught a narrow curriculum dedicated to a narrow theology (jihadi Islam) and gave a complementary military training.

The narrow theology recast Islam around a single institution, the jihad; it redefined the jihad as exclusively military and claimed the military jihad to be an offensive war entered into by individual born-again devotees as opposed to defence by an Islamic community under threat. The jihadi madrasahs in Pakistan trained both the Afghan refugee children who were later recruited into the Taliban and the Arab-Afghans who were later networked by the organization called al-Qaeda ("the Base"). If national liberation wars created proto-state apparatuses, the international jihad created a private network of specialists in violence.

America did not create right-wing Islam, a tendency that came into being through intellectual debates, both inside political Islam and with competing secular ideologies, such as Marxism-Leninism. America's responsibility was to turn this ideological tendency into a political organization – by incorporating it into America's Cold War strategy in the closing phase of the Cold War.

Before the Afghan jihad, right-wing political Islam was an ideological tendency with little organization and muscle on the ground. The Afghan jihad gave it

numbers, organization, skills, reach, confidence and a coherent objective. America created an infrastructure of terror but heralded it as an infrastructure of liberation.

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