

[Back Magazine](#)

The Way I See It

On delegated aggression

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To see the Israeli aggression in Lebanon in purely religious terms is to miss the larger picture of an imperialistic `world order'.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Does peace stand a chance? The U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon.

I AM writing this article at a time when Israel is shelling Lebanon with the sort of freedom from human and civic concerns that would be heavily — and perhaps militarily — chastised if it was practised by an Arab country, and more so against a people who belong to another religion and are considered by many Israelis as belonging to another ethnicity or race. But I have not written a single article about this shelling as yet.

If I were an Islamic fundamentalist, or even a deeply religious Muslim, I would probably be apoplectic at the shelling. And perhaps with good reason. This, finally, is the reason why an ordinary Muslim is more likely to listen to and admire an Islamic fundamentalist than someone like me. After all, the shelling affects ordinary Muslims, as do various other equivalents of the shelling in other parts of the world.

Complex phenomenon

Islamic fundamentalism arises from an elitist and narrowed reading of the Islamic texts by groups of mullahs. But it also has its demotic base in the effort to bring religion to the people (and its other side: people to religion) and, above all, in a spontaneous emotional response to the sufferings, real or perceived, of ordinary Muslims. The usual liberal-secular dismissal of fundamentalist politicians — whether Hindu in India, Muslim in Pakistan or Christian in the U.S. — as simply Machiavellian characters remains blind to this complexity, and as such cuts little ice with ordinary Hindus, Muslims or Christians, especially in periods of real or perceived threat.

Similarly, religious fundamentalism in countries like India, Pakistan and Egypt is not simply a throwback to the Dark Ages of the past, as some liberal-secular commentators seem to imply. Both Hindu and Islamic fundamentalisms are not only revivalist in their tone, but also deeply modern — even at times "Western" — in the structures of their perception.

It is not a coincidence that four out of the five *sarsangchalak*, or supreme leaders, of the Hindu nationalist-fundamentalist RSS had a background in modern science: K.B. Hedgewar was a doctor, M.S. Gowalkar was a zoologist, Rajendra Singh was a physician, and K.S. Sudershan, the current head, is an engineer. Similarly, the two "founders" of Islamic Pakistan — though both were not Islamic fundamentalists — Jinnah and Iqbal, were highly Westernised people, with European education. Even the rise of groups and ideologies, such as that of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, had a lot to do with visits to Europe by their founders or leaders. Even the most reactionary of Islamic fundamentalists are distinguished by their dismissal of European cultural and educational forms, and their respect for (even awe of) technology and, sometimes, forms of organisation stemming from Europe and the U.S.: hence, the gadgets and guns with which even some very austere Taliban leaders are said to have surrounded themselves.

Derivative rhetoric

While it is common to note that the Hindu RSS based itself on Mussolini's fascist Black Shirts and that Bal Thackeray is a great admirer of Hitler, it should also be noted that Islamic fundamentalist groups share almost as much affinity with European thinking of a certain sort. Their very claim that Islam is not compatible with democracy echoes the worst and most empty-headed of the various rhetorical chants of the Right in Europe. So does their tendency to subscribe to the "clash of civilisations" thesis of shallow and largely ahistorical thinkers in the West. In actual fact, perhaps this theory is a good indicator of a kind of contemporary fundamentalism: while Hindu nationalists might burn Valentine Day cards, Islamic militants might suicide-bomb American installations and American Rightists might advocate levelling West Asia under asphalt, all three — Hindu, Islamic and "Western" Rightists — agree on the fact that we are witnessing a clash of civilisations. Their degree of agreement as well as their terms of definition in these matters is surprisingly similar — being rooted in a "modern" European Fascist-Rightist tradition — and they only differ in their preferred aim. Or in other words, members of all three Rightist/ fundamentalist streams agree on the inevitability or necessity of genocide of some sorts — it is just that they have different "target groups" in mind.

One area where the "European" influence on Islamic fundamentalism is increasingly visible is the growing anti-semiticism of Islamic ideologues and their followers. This anti-semiticism is new to Islam. While Muslim cultures did have their conflicts with other peoples, Jews were generally safer in Muslim countries than in Europe until the 1930s, or the foundation of Israel. It need not be pointed out that the Christian reconquest of Spain not only meant the expulsion of the Muslim Moors but also the expulsion of Spanish Jews: we remember the year when Columbus sailed on his discovery of the new world, but we forget that two shiploads of Jews were also forced to leave Spain in the same year from the same port.

Not only was there less persecution of Jews in the Muslim countries, the conflicts that took place had to do with real politik or economic factors: they were not based on the demonisation of all Jews as murderers of Jesus/ God (the influential Christian concept of Deicide) or as cabalistic intriguers who performed human sacrifices and esoteric rites in their synagogues, as was often the case in the Middle Ages and even later in Europe. Neither was it based on pseudo-scientific 19th century theories of racism — for instance, pitting Aryans against Semites — as it often was in Europe and America until the fall of Nazism. As such, anti-semiticism of the sort that one hears from religious Muslims today is a recent

development. Actually, even Bin Laden started focusing on Jews as the prime scapegoats/ culprits quite late in his demagogic career.

That is the reason why I hesitate to write about the latest Israeli misadventure in West Asia. I remain as staunchly opposed to Israeli militarism and lack of compromise, verging on a blatant kind of racism, as anyone else with an objective mind. But, as a Muslim, I cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that the justified and necessary opposition to Israeli militarism has, in many Islamic circles, become an opposition to Jews and, hence, potentially or actually anti-Semitic. Despite the fact that this is an anti-semiticism borrowed from European traditions and that Islam in the past had little or nothing like it, and in spite of the curious fact that the Arabs are themselves a Semitic people. Is it a sign of the latent self-hate of colonised and semi-colonised people, as Frantz Fanon might have seen it, this growing anti-semiticism among a Semitic people?

And finally is this sort of religion-based definition capable of addressing the main issues? For instance, it is easy to see the current Israeli misadventure, with effective U.S. support, as another attack on a Muslim people. But by doing so one relegates the matter to the kind of ahistoricity that makes it impossible to address more pressing matters. For instance, the current Israeli misadventure is a direct descendant of the National Security Strategy (NSS) announced by the U.S. in September 2002. As Noam Chomsky has noted in **Doctrines and Visions**, the NSS undermined the Westphalian system of international order and the U.N. charter by enshrining and legalising the right to aggression in response to a perceived or real threat to a country, or even in anticipation of it.

The right to aggression

The first part of this strategy was played out immediately with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The second part is being played out with the Israeli aggression in Lebanon. When the NSS was passed, Henry Kissinger had welcomed it but also noted that the right to aggression cannot be "a universal principle available to every nation." As Chomsky pointed out sometime back, this meant that, in effect, "the right of aggression must be reserved to the United States, perhaps delegated to chosen clients." The Israeli aggression is an example of this delegation. The world order half-envisaged by Bush and his cronies will depend on both America's right of aggression and its ability to delegate it to some cronies. To condemn the Israeli aggression in merely "religious" terms is to miss this larger picture, with consequences leading to further isolation and failure to effectively oppose U.S. imperialism.

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