

Islam and the Challenge of Communism: The Case of Afghanistan

Allen K. Jones*

The conflict that has been taking place in Afghanistan for the past three years has come to be interpreted in markedly different ways depending on one's viewpoint. Those in the West, including students and specialists of the region and policy makers, tend to view the events in Afghanistan primarily in geo-political or geo-strategic terms. For instance, questions are asked such as what impact is being felt in terms of the military, strategic and economic interests of the superpowers? Of the other states in the region? What effect will there be on relations between states in the region? Between the superpowers? And so on.¹ Differing from this view and its apparent preoccupation with security and strategic concerns, is a perspective that is more commonly voiced in the Muslim world² which casts the conflict in Afghanistan in terms of Islam and the challenge of Communism, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say in terms of the converse: Communism and the challenge of Islam. This view suggests that what the real conflict in Afghanistan is about is the struggle between these two great ideologies or belief systems and the effort on the part of each to vanquish the other.

Because this latter interpretation is less frequently presented or voiced at meetings of Western scholars, I would like to develop to some extent this theme in this short paper. First of all, I would like to present some of the points made by this Islamic school of interpretation—I would

*Dr. Jones holds a Ph.D. in History from Duke University. He has worked with Afghan refugees for two years at Peshawar. Currently he is a Consultant at the United States Agency for International Development.

¹ See Zalmay Khalilzad, "The Struggle for Afghanistan," *Survey*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (Spring 1980) pp. 189 ff., Alfred L. Monks, "The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," Published by American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington DC 1981; Selig Harrison, "Dateline Afghanistan: Exit Through Finland," *Foreign Policy*, No. 41, Winter 1980-81 and Raju G. C. Thomas, "The Afghanistan Crisis and South Asian Security," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, pp. 414 ff.

² It is interesting to note how little such authorities on Afghanistan as Louis Dupree, Richard Newell and Richard Gordon have to say about Islam in their books. See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). Richard Newell, *The Politics of Afghanistan*, London: Cornell University Press, 1972; and Richard Gordon, *Afghanistan*, Stanford: The Hoover Institution for War and Peace, 1981.

like to call it the Islamic view for the purposes of this paper—and then at the end I would like to try and evaluate some of these points by way of conclusion. Hopefully this discussion will help enrich our understanding not just of what has and is taking place in Afghanistan but also of the forces of Islam and Communism which have such a vast and significant influence in our twentieth century world.

To begin with, the advocates of this Islamic view³ argue basically that Islam and Communism are two ideological systems with diametrically opposed principles and as such are bound to clash with one another. And the stage currently where the two are locked in mortal combat is Afghanistan. The tone and posture of these writers is one of confidence that ultimately Islam will prevail.⁴ As a compelling indication of the coming Islamic triumph they point to the record of the Afghan *mujahideen* (holy warriors or freedom fighters)⁵ who were not expected to last against the sophisticated military might of the Soviet Union which had in earlier years crushed opposition in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in a matter of days and weeks. But three years later the Afghan freedom-fighters are still doing battle with the Soviets and, in fact, there are reports that the *mujahideen* are gaining from their experience and are becoming more effective opponents because of greater coordination and cooperation and better leadership, shown most recently in the summer campaign for the Panjshir valley.⁶ Those of the Islamic view or argument also stress that the *mujahideen* are not just fighting for their homeland but that they are fighting for the whole Muslim world as well.⁷ Incidentally this theme—that the Afghans are not just fighting for themselves—has also been voiced by certain groups in the west. For instance at a conference attended by this author in Florence, Italy, in March of 1982, sponsored by the socialist parties of Italy and France among others, the report which concluded the conference stated “To all the world’s people we say: ‘To help Afghanistan means to protect our own security and freedom.’”⁸

³ This view is forthrightly presented in three books that have been published in Pakistan since the invasion: A.M. Manzar, *Red Clouds Over Afghanistan*. (Islamabad: The Institute for Policy Studies, 1980), Fath-ur-Rehman and Bashir A. Qureshi, *Afghans Meet Soviet Challenge*. (Peshawar: Institute of Regional Studies, 1981) and Tahir Amin, *Afghanistan Crisis: Implication and Options for the Muslim World, Iran and Pakistan*. (Islamabad: The Institute of Policy Studies, 1982).

⁴ See Tahir Amin, *Afghanistan Crisis*, p. 119.

⁵ See Rahman and Qureshi, *Afghans Meet Soviet Challenge*, p. 70.

⁶ See Edward Giradet’s five-part series on Afghanistan and the resistance in the *Christian Science Monitor* beginning July 9.

⁷ See A.M. Manzar, *Red Clouds Over Afghanistan*, p. 94.

⁸ In America, also, the conservative Committee for a Free Afghanistan which is a “Project of the Council for the Defence of Freedom” reiterates this theme in its literature as it appeals for American assistance for the *mujahideen* who they assert are serving in the front lines of freedom’s battle to protect American security interests. See, *Free Afghanistan Report*, Number 2 (April 1982) and Number 3 (August 1982). Published by the Committee for a Free Afghanistan, Washington DC.

While those of the Islamic view stress the current role of the *mujahideen* in their service for Islam and the Muslim world, they trace the beginnings of Afghanistan's current "Islamic movement" not to the rural hills and valleys of Afghanistan from where most of the *mujahideen* have come but to the urban, middle classes of the cities. Qazi Husain Ahmad, in his foreward to F. Rahman and B. Qureshi's book, *Afghans Meet Soviet Challenge*, identifies the movement as "basically a student-teacher movement."⁹ Later in the bok the authors recount the story of one of the young leaders of the Islamic Movement, an intellectual at Kabul University, Abdur Rahim Niazi, who died under mysterious circumstances in 1970.¹⁰ In their description of Niazi, the authors take care to link Niazi at least symbolically with the *mujahideen*; they call him "the first *Mujahid* of the present Afgan crisis"¹¹ and later, "the animating spirit of the Islamic movement (who) has become the guardian angel of the freedom fighters after his martyrdom."¹²

Tahir Amin, in his insightful and thought-provoking study, states that Abdur Rahim Niazi made the first serious attempt to organize Muslim students in Afghanistan with the founding of the *Jawanan-i-Musalman* (Muslim Youth) at Kabul University in 1968, the year Amin uses as the one to date the founding of the Islamic movement in Afghanistan.¹³ He identifies engineer Gulbaddin Hekmatyar who later founded the *Hizb-i-Islam*, currently one of the leading resistance groups in Peshawar, as one of the early members of this student organization. Amin also points out that while the Islamic movement received some organizational impetus in 1968, a nucleus was formed in 1957 by a group of Professors (which included Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani, founder of the *Jammat-i-Islam*) some of whom were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the *Jammat-i-Islam* of Pakistan. They met to counter the growing influence of communism in Afghanistan made possible by increasing military and economic ties with the Soviet Union established in the mid 1950s. Amin goes on to say that because of the Islamic movement's earlier roots, the resistance movement was not a spontaneous reaction to the events of 1978 and 1979 but "rather, it is more exact to say that the movement represents both an organized attempt against communist thinking and the revival of Islam as an alternative to the communist ideology."¹⁴ Thus, here Amin clearly affirms that what is taking place in Afghanistan is related directly to the struggle of the competing ideologies of Islam and Communism for supremacy and the loyalty of the hearts and minds of men. At this point

⁹ Rahman and Qureshi, p. vii.

¹⁰ It is thought he was poisoned and that the regime at the time was responsible. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³ Amin, p. 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Amin goes on to give the aims and purposes of the Islamic movement and it is interesting to note the modern cast in which he places them:

“This movement aims at the reconstruction of Afghan society according to the Islamic tenets. The purpose is to create a modern state with political participation and socio-economic justice in line with the Islamic values. The movement is not averse to new technology, modernization and progress as has been generally understood in the West.”¹⁵

And, again, consistent with the view that Communism and Islam represent two opposing ideological systems, Amin claims that an Islamic ideological elite has emerged in Afghanistan in recent years. Since 1968, he writes:

“...a qualitative change has occurred in Afghan society. Traditional loci of power i.e. tribal, ethnic, linguistic elite have been replaced by the ideological elite. Most of the ongoing resistance has been organized and led by this ideological elite of the Islamic movement. Later it (the elite) was combined with the traditional and spontaneous revolt which erupted in 1978 and 1979 against the communist government’s attempts to Sovietize their society.”¹⁶

As Rahman and Qureshi do, Amin is also careful to point out in this statement the solidarity between the urban, middle class Islamic movement and the rural, village-based *mujahideen* movement. Therefore, the point these authors are making is that these two groups, different though their backgrounds may be, have been able to unite in a common cause and by pooling their resources have been able to mount a significant counterforce to the Soviets’ attempt to impose their will in Afghanistan.

Thus, in the view of those who pose the Islamic argument, Afghanistan has become a test case to see which of the two, Islam or Communism, will emerge triumphant in the end. In their discussions these authors touch on various issues from the Afghanistan experience that can be cast as either strengthening or weakening the cause of Islam vis-a-vis the challenge of Communism. What are these factors for a consideration of them may provide further insights into the theme under discussion.

Let us consider first the factors that can work to undermine and defeat Islam. One is the point made by Amin that the Muslim world’s disunity and lack of political will arising out of short-term national interest constitute a grave threat to the ability of Islam to face the challenge of Communism: “The Muslim World, beset by inter-state rivalries, local

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

conflicts and regional tensions is a special target of the Soviet Union.”¹⁷ He indicates what he feels needs to be done: “...strategic implications and potential political, economic and military benefits demand that the Muslim world must get together and do some hardheaded thinking in order to develop a common strategic perspective to solve their problems.”¹⁸

Another point made by Khurshid Ahmad in the introduction to Dr. Manzar's book is the need in Muslim countries (Ahmad uses Pakistan as his example) to return to the genuine principles and values of Islam in national policy formation and decision-making. The drift away from these principles and values, he implies, has contributed significantly to the weakened state Muslim countries find themselves in, individually and collectively.

“The present situation makes it imperative that we abandon the strategem of house-top declarations of Islamisation and adopt an all-comprehensive strategy of genuine Islamisation by purging national life of anti-Islamic values and practices and establishing the Islamic social and economic order insuring freedom, justice, moral uplift, military mobilization of the people and the common man's participation in all areas of decision-making and programme implementation.”¹⁹

A third factor is the failure in Muslim countries which often have weak political and economic institutions to check the encroachments of super-power ideology. Thus as Amin writes:

“Domestically many decision-makers of the Muslim states hardly seem to realize that modernization processes, education, technology, urbanization and industrialization are not value-free processes. As these processes are initiated with the help of the big powers, they inevitably bring their influences within the country, including the ideological influences as well. The result is that significant sections of the middle classes are carried away by these influences giving birth to secular, capitalist or communist tendencies, which pave the way for various anti-Islamic movements.”²⁰

Amin's prescription for dealing with this weakness is for the Islamic movement to “create a consciousness among the Muslim *Ummah* of foreign threats emerging from the ideological encroachments of foreign powers but also to provide a common framework for social, political and economic development for the Muslim world.”²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁹ Manzar, p. 18.

²⁰ Amin, p. 117.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Finally there is the strength of the Soviet Union as a military power which threatens to weaken or further exploit the weaknesses of the Muslim states. Amin also addresses this point by saying that "the stunning demonstration of military power (by the Soviets) also shows that they are prepared to back up their interests with military power and they perceive that the balance of forces has changed in their favor. This Soviet self-image of strength is certain to create new threats to the present international system in the future."²² On this point, Amin goes on to say that the Soviet's position vis-a-vis the Muslim and the Third World has been strengthened by the acquiescence of the West, particularly the United States. Thus, "The Afghanistan crisis also reflects that Russians perceive American resolve to maintain their influence in the developing countries compromised." Because the Americans have done little by word or action to protest Soviet action in Afghanistan, Amin says "the implication is clear for the Soviets, Americans are withdrawing therefore, the Soviets should move ahead with their socialist conception of the international systems."²³

Thus, these are a summary of some of the factors that could serve to weaken the Islamic community in its struggle with its ideological enemy of communism. Having presented these weaknesses, what then are the strengths Islam can count on in its confrontation with Communism. One, perhaps the principle one and an issue which is cited by all of the authors, is the fear that the Soviets have of Islam. Manzar mentions the Soviet's fear of the resurgence of Islam along its southern boundary and goes on to say that

"the Soviets are not concerned at any military threat from the Muslim countries but they are obviously afraid of the ideological dimensions of Islam as a comprehensive, resurgent, moral and social order posing as an alternative to suppressive, atheistic, regimented and monolithic communism which has not been able to make much headway in Muslim countries inspite of their poverty and general backwardness."²⁴

Rahman and Qureshi also mention the Soviet's fear of the Islamic revival by saying "With all these impelling forces Russia's apprehension of the Islamic resurgence movement growing to irresistible proportions has greatly contributed to the formation of her militant policies and precipitated her decision to take the drastic step of direct military intervention in Afghanistan."²⁵ They also cited as a factor in this the

²² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Rahman and Qureshi, p. 63.

Soviet Union's own Muslims: "Since the Soviet Union has a substantial Muslim population which constitutes the overwhelming majority of her Central Asian republics, she is seriously concerned lest the impact of this movement should start a chain reaction culminating in the fission and disintegration of this totalitarian monolith."²⁶ This point is also made by Amin who places it in a historical context. He quotes Amir Abdul Rahman, a former ruler of Afghanistan, who lived in Russia for some time: "Russian policy in Asia is greatly influenced by fear of Islam and particularly of a general uprising among Russia's own Muslim subjects in the event of war between Russia and a Muslim power."²⁷ Amin also refers to the Islamic resurgence by saying tht the Soviets were certainly aware of it "engulfing the Muslim countries, particularly the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Islamization process in Pakistan and the emerging Islamic movement in Afghanistan."²⁸ He also claims that the Soviets pointed out to the Indians that it would be in their interest to prevent the Muslim countries from uniting together under the banner of Islamic fundamentalism.²⁹

Another factor of strength for the Islamic approach runs as a theme through all three books: the essential vitality and force of the Islamic movement and the new found wealth in the Muslim World which provides resources for the development of coordination and cooperation among the Muslim states which will aid in the struggle against communism. Amin, in outlining the strategy for the Muslim World in its struggle, lays stress on the basis for unity and the resources the Muslim countries have to wage a successful battle against communism: "We believe," he writes, "that Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Persian Gulf States are in a position to take the initiative and mobilize all diplomatic, financial and military support for the Afghan *mujahideen*."³⁰ Amin goes on to say that if the *mujahideen* are given support by the Muslim countries and if their issue is handled skillfully, then "the Muslim World is in a position to sustain the struggle and raise the cost of the invader to the extent where it is forced to withdraw."³¹

Finally as an example of the strength of Islam versus Communism, reference can be made to the experience of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Mention has been made of te deliberate policy of the Soviets' military operation in Afghanistan to drive the Afghans out of their homeland into Pakistan and Iran. Part of the rationale for this policy has been the thinking that the Afghan refugees will become an economic burden on the Pakistanis and eventually will have a destabilizing

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Amin, p. 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*

influence which undermines the government and thus serves Soviet interests. But this has not happened. It is true that the Afghan refugees have become a burden and there have been tensions but the remarkable thing is how peaceful and harmonious relations have been. While cultural affinities have played a part, it should also be noted that Islam and the empathy felt for Muslim brothers in distress has played an important positive role as well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to evaluate the points presented above by way of saying that I feel some of what has been said in reference to the theme of Islam and the Challenge of Communism has been what I would call rhetorical and some of it has been quite real and factual. The problem with rhetoric is that, in addition to leading to exaggerations and misstatements, it tends to underplay or obscure certain fundamental problems such as the problem of disunity and rivalry between the states (in the Muslim World). For instance, one of the things I found lacking in these treatments was any serious discussion of the division within the ranks of the resistance such as between the moderates (Gailani, Mojadiddi and Mohammadi) and the fundamentalists though some mention is made of Rabbani and Hekmatyar. Nor is any mention made of the split in the Hizb group between Hekmatyar and Younis Khalis. These differences should not be glossed over but confronted. An understanding of what divides people needs to be reached before any real workable unity can be achieved. And in terms of exaggeration, I feel that perhaps too much has been made of the need to fear the Soviets and their might. They are not as invincible as they appear and they have some real deep and basic problems such as adequate food production. By the same token, I am not sure I would make as much of the fear the Soviets have of the Islamic resurgence though I would certainly agree it exists.

But while one needs to be wary of rhetoric, it is also a sign of things positive too. It points to the tremendous ferment and energy in the Muslim world, the awakening of its people, especially its young with their questions and their thirst for knowledge and this is all very hopeful. If rhetoric indicates a spirit of enthusiasm and inquiry then it is a good thing and it can serve well the Muslim community in the days of trials and tribulations ahead and help to sustain it until it arrives at the place where its goals of peace and social justice are close at hand. And a final word about the *mujahideen* and Afghanistan—the Muslim world has chosen a fitting symbol in the freedom fighters who continue to fight with few resources and against a mighty enemy. They manage to continue to fight and so must Islam continue to confront Communism if here it is to be any chance of its eventual triumph.