SEPTEMBER 11, ISLAMISM AND THE WESTERN RESPONSE:

THE LIMITS OF THE BUSH-THATCHER DOCTRINE

By

Mike Ikhariale

Poor Palestinians. How I wish they realized the forces that were arrayed against them and why it came so heavily. When I saw President Yasser Arafat under some flickers of candle light inside his "presidential" office where he had been locked in since the Israelis demolished all the physical and social infrastructures of the Palestinians Authority, crying helplessly that the west should come to his aid and call on the Israelis to withdraw from his backyard, it was obvious that the man does not yet know or he was only pretending not to know, that his real enemies and tormentors are not his estranged cousins, the Israelis, but some people who have resolved that islamism, the type the al Qaida and the Talibans have embraced must be defeated at all costs.

The problems of the Palestinians have been there for decades and not much effort was made to resolve them. This has led to a deep-rooted frustration which indirectly culminated in the dastardly terrorists act of September 11, 2001 which in turn led to the death of thousands of innocent lives and the destruction of principal symbols of American society. Those who inflicted these barbaric injuries on the American society and the general western values were well known: they were members of radical Islamic groups who had a long standing grudge against the west and they were largely hosted by well known Islamic governments.

While this does not mean the guilt of every Moslem or Islamic nation, the west is however reluctant to make this very important distinction. It is very simple. You are either for us or you are against us. And in this rather rough edged classification, so many unfortunate people, of whom the recent pummeling of the Palestinians by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) is an ugly example, had had to suffer. And from the look of things, many more would still suffer aplenty. The often loaded sectarian rhetoric by Islamic intellectuals, threatening to undo the west and its secular systems and by implication, its "evil civilization", have further complicated the terrain of rational discourse of the matter. And this has unwittingly strengthened the hands of those who, in the best of times, never wish others outside of their zone of influence well.

In the heat of the passion generated by the events of September 11, President Bush declared a ‘crusade’ against the perpetrators of those evil acts against America. Needless to say that the history of crusade evokes a great deal of inter-civilizational hatred and the subsequent effort to change the terminology of the engagement by Washington did not seem to have changed any thing: The new struggle is one between competing civilizations and in its simplistic pairing, between "good" and "evil", two essential ingredients required for the prosecution of a ‘just war’. Since the choice tactic of battle by these groups is terrorism, all that would need to be proved before a revenge attack is launched is that a particular group has applied terrorist tactics or harbors terrorists.

The practice of suicide bombing, usually deployed by the utterly frustrated Palestinians seems to coincide in all four walls with the new image of the terrorist who would gleefully kill himself just to inflict greater damaged on his generally
stronger enemy. Ariel Sharon cashed on this and the Bush administration expectedly gave him the go ahead to ‘seek and destroy’ these "infrastructures of terror" which, in simple language and in the circumstance, translate into any Palestinian, women or children. It is interesting to hear Israeli military spokespersons say that there is no way to tell a suicide bomber from an innocent Palestinian. So very moving Palestinian is a good target. This, so far, has been the undoing of the Palestinians.

It was therefore totally naive to have expected that President Bush was going to genuinely order a stoppage of the massive destruction and humiliation of the Palestinians against the well stated doctrine of "you are either for us or you are against us" and "who ever harbors terrorists is an enemy of the west", fit only for quick destruction. All that Arafat was asked to do was to stop and "denounce terrorism" as was been carried out by suicide bombers or as they have now been politically redesignated, "homicide murderers", or ...

If there was any strategic thinker in the ranks of the Palestinians, it should have been obvious that this was not the time to toy with such tactics as suicide bombing, as inevitable and indeed, compelling, as the weapon may seem to a people who have been under 35 years of ruthless occupation. From the boots to the flashlights, the apaches helicopters gunships and the destructive armored tanks that the Israelis used mercilessly against the Palestinians, everything was from the US military arsenal. Even the salaries of the Israeli troops are indirectly paid for from the billions of US taxpayers dollars that generously prop the Jewish State. In many respects, the hell that was let lose on the Palestinians even as Collin Powell shuttled aimlessly across the Arab world was to some extent, a sweet revenge for the ‘Islamic’ attack of September 11. Pure and simple.

That is why Sharon did not stop the siege on Palestinian "infrastructures of terrors" in spite of the deafly muted call by the President of the US for him to ‘stop’. Another ground zero must be created and brought home to those who think terror pays, so the logic goes. And at the end of it all, Jenini the "headquarters of terror" became a human tragedy of genocidal proportions. But who can weep for the unfortunate Palestinians?

One major reason that the Palestinian tragedy would be unfortunately prolonged is the new articulation in the west as coldly encapsulated in what we may simply refer to as the Thatcher Doctrine. It postulates that Islamism is the new Bolshevism. And in the old ideological rhetoric of Ronald Regan, and evil that must be liquidated. In an article published in The Guardian newspaper of England on Tuesday the 12th of April, 2002 when Sharon was actively fighting “terror”, Lady Thatcher had this to say: "In many respects the challenge of Islamic terror is unique, hence the difficulty western intelligence services encountered trying to predict and prevent its onslaughts. The enemy is not, of course, a religion - most Muslims deplore what has occurred. Nor is it a single state, though this form of terrorism needs the support of states to give it succor. Perhaps the best parallel is with early communism. Islamic extremism today, like bolshevism in the past, is an armed doctrine. It is an aggressive ideology promoted by fanatical, well-armed devotees. And, like communism, it requires an all-embracing long-term strategy to defeat it".

She went on: The first phase of that strategy had to be a military assault on the enemy in Afghanistan, a phase that is now approaching its end. I believe that while the new interim government there deserves support, the United States is right not to allow itself to become bogged down with ambitious nation-building in that treacherous territory”. A clear message to Afghan interim leader, Hamid Kaizar, that after the end of al Qaida, off we go, and you are henceforth on your own!

Thatcher went further to argue that the ‘axis of evil’ rope must be broadened and then hit harder if only to prevent any future occurrence of events of the 9-11 proportions. On Iraq, she thinks it is only a case of an unfinished job and what is left is simply "when and how". The old lady went on to pontificate that "The second phase of the war against terrorism should
be to strike at other centers of Islamic terror that have taken root in Africa, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. This will require first-rate intelligence, shrewd diplomacy and a continued extensive military commitment. Our enemies have had years to entrench themselves, and they will not be dislodged without fierce and bloody resistance”. With this battle blueprint, how could we have expected something different from the Israelis when they executed "operation protective shield" targeted against those they classify as "terrorists”?

Given the reality of the unipolar world we have found ourselves and the fact that radical islamism has discredited itself as a violent and terrorist consortium, it behoves the Palestinians Authority to adopt a very realistic policy of tuning down on their acute rhetoric which are often couched as processes in jihad and needless martyrdom. For sure, the cause of the Palestinians is just but they have not been fortunate to find 'good and credible' allies. That reality requires them not surrender but to develop tact and general circumspection as they struggle to reclaim their land. Unfortunately, in that part of the world, people seem to prefer to use more of their hearts than their heads, exchanging stones and yelling for bullets.

If the truth must be told, it is obvious that the Arabs have been the greatest enemies of the Palestinian people. It is not enough to mount loudspeakers all over the nook and corners of the Moslem world denouncing Zionism and the occupation of Palestine while Arab princes and princesses, the supposed custodian of Islam, continue to fuel the western economy with oil, whose proceeds they corruptly stash away in western banks. Indulging in habits they routinely tell their people are evil and ungodly. The Moslems-dominated regimes of the Middle East must cure themselves of their deep-rooted hypocrisy and begin to democratize their societies and empower the citizenry because, like communism, the current rising islamism is the outcome of social dislocations which are brought about by inequality, corruption and man’s inhumanity to man.

The Talibans, for example, took roots in Afghanistan when the elite of the society failed in their political responsibility to improve on the lots of the people. Religious fanaticism, whether in Christendom and in the Islamic world, is most likely to germinate and fester in societies that have abandoned their poor and the weak. No one who is sure of tomorrow, for example, would readily opt for a suicide mission in all the mistaken hope of martyrdom.

Of course, the west is wrong to think that bombing and the indiscriminate rolling out of tanks would be enough to quench the fire of Islamism, which they perceive as threatening their civilization. As long as there is such massive inequalities, as long as corrupt regimes continue to hold sway in most of the Moslem worlds, little educated fanatics like the Talibans will continue to germinate and, indeed, propagate, at least, in the short run.

The suggestion by Thatcher that the US should not involve her self in nation building and civil society deepening in these devastated regions is not the answer. In our considered opinion, the US must assume the reconstruction of all the Palestinian towns and villages that were recently flattened. The frightened and terrorized Palestinians have seen American weapons at work and the enormous harm that they can inflict. It is now the time for them to see America construction trucks and building materials coming in and the amount of happiness they can bring.

Such would be a better approach to the challenge of terrorism than that being proposed by Margaret Thatcher. There is no doubt that she commands a great deal of audience among the West where there is a legitimate anger against those that hate them and would want to destroy them through terrorist acts such as happened on September 11. But there is yet another option open to everyone desirous of halting the unnecessary cycle of violence and the abandonment of the unfortunate reclassification of the world along the same old lines of those who fought the Crusade centuries ago. That option is to judiciously isolate those groups that are guilty and punish them accordingly without necessarily visiting the sins of the father on the sons and, worse still, a blanket condemnation of a whole civilization for the sins of a deviant few.