

Islam Under Siege



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Islam Under Siege

*Living Dangerously in a
Post-Honor World*

AKBAR S. AHMED

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First published in 2003 by Polity Press in association with
Blackwell Publishing Ltd
Reprinted in 2008

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishing Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Distributed in the USA by
Blackwell Publishing Inc.
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ahmed, Akbar S.

Islam under siege : living dangerously in a post-honor world / Akbar Ahmed.

p. cm. — (Themes for the 21st century)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7456-2210-1 (hb) — ISBN 978-0-7456-2210-0 (pbk.)

1. Islam—20th century. 2. Islam and world politics. 3.

Globalization—Religious aspects—Islam. I. Title. II. Series.

BP161.3 .A35 2003

297'.09'0511—dc21

2002154595

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 Plantin

by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex

Printed and bound in United States by Odyssey Press Inc., Gonic, New Hampshire

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

For Larry

in continuation of our discussion about civilizations;
and in gratitude for his scholarship and friendship

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Acknowledgments

Some of the ideas in this book have been developed from lectures, in particular at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, and subsequent articles published in its journal *The World Today*; from the inaugural address of the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, Washington DC, which was published in *The Middle East Journal* (Washington); and from articles published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Washington), *History Today*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *Independent*, and the *Guardian* (London). The aforementioned are gratefully acknowledged. A special thanks to Religion News Service, USA.

I am grateful to the following for their comments: Amineh Ahmed, David Godwin, Louis Goodman, Carole O'Leary, Peter Lewis, James Mittelman, Joe Montville, Mustapha Kamal Pasha, Chris Rojek, Todd Sedmak, and Tamara Sonn. I wish to acknowledge Kathleen Cahill of the *Washington Post* for her invaluable assistance in helping to edit the book and making suggestions to clarify the issues it raises. As always my wife, Zeenat, inspired me with her commitment to my work, oversaw the writing of the book and helped me in refining my ideas. The book is dedicated to our friend Professor Lawrence Rosen of Princeton University in acknowledgment of his scholarship and friendship.

Akbar S. Ahmed

Introduction: God's Gamble

“There will be a time when your religion will be like a hot piece of coal in the palm of your hand; you will not be able to hold it.” The Prophet of Islam was gazing into the future while he talked to his followers early in the 7th century in Arabia. “Would this mean there would be very few Muslims?” someone asked later. “No,” replied the Prophet, “They will be large in numbers, more than ever before, but powerless like the foam on the ocean waves.”

After September 11, 2001, the prediction of the Prophet seemed to be coming true. Islam became as hot as a piece of coal for its followers. Yet it had more followers than ever before and they were, for the first time, spread all over the globe. Muslim societies everywhere appeared to be in turmoil and Muslims felt themselves in the dock, accused of belonging to a “terrorist,” “fanatic,” and “extremist” religion. Islam, it seemed, was under siege.

The “war on terrorism” that President George Bush declared after September 11 threatens to stretch into the century; for many Muslims it appears to be a war against Islam. For a Muslim therefore, on both a global and personal level, this is a time of challenge and despair.

As an anthropologist I will try to make sense of a changing, complicated, and dangerous world. I will

attempt to explain *what* is going wrong in the Muslim world; *why* it is going wrong, and *how* we, because my explanation involves Muslims and non-Muslims, are to move ahead if we wish for global stability and even harmony in the future.

I will use the methodology of reflexive anthropology and give examples of a personal nature to illustrate a point. I will also raise questions and suggest possible future exploratory directions. I do not pretend to have the answers. A multiplicity of interpretations is possible. Old concepts are being debated or rejected.

Rupture, change, and attempts at religious reform have been evident in Muslim societies over the last two centuries since the advent of Western colonization. Certain technological and economic developments further exacerbate the divisions and debate within society. The ideological frame within which Muslim normative behavior and thought is to be understood is itself being challenged. Muslim normative behavior cannot be understood without the Quran – for Muslims the word of God – and the life of the Prophet; together the two form the *Shari'a* or the Path.

Muslims everywhere are being forced to reassess and re-examine Islam. Questions are being raised about God and the purpose of creation. There are questions also about the tenets of Islam itself and what its future holds.

God's gamble

In order to understand our world it is necessary to remember that God does not play dice with the universe. Einstein was right. But in creating human beings and giving them free will God did gamble with history. Seeing the state of affairs in the early 21st century – the widespread poverty, the lack of justice and compassion, the willful depletion of

the resources of the planet, the senseless and widespread violence – God may well be regretting human creation now. And we have a good idea of what He had in mind. Through inspired messengers and sacred literature God conveyed the idea to man and woman that they were created in His own image. (Contrary to the widely held stereotype of Islam as a misogynist religion, the Quran addresses and includes both men and women.) The Quran describes man as God's "deputy" or "vicegerent" (Surah 2: Verse 30).¹

God took a gamble by creating human beings. There is a central and cruel tension in the very idea of free will: Man has the capacity to kill and destroy just as easily as to be just and compassionate. This implies a certain confidence on the part of God that human beings would use their learning and instincts to suppress the wild and anarchic impulse of their nature. God wants humans to do good and to avoid evil (Surah 9: Verse 112). He wants justice and balance in human society (Surah 55: Verse 9). What perhaps would disappoint God the most, therefore, are the extreme expressions of violence of which humans are capable, especially now that they have developed their genius to change and control their environment. The marvelous achievements in medicine and communications have not subdued man's rapacious appetite. Human society is not even prepared to accept that it is busily destroying the planet. Arguments about depriving future generations appear to fall on deaf ears.

God's vision of Himself in the Quran is also explicit. So while God sees Himself as omnipotent and omnipresent, He also emphasizes justice and compassion. He describes Himself as the God of the universes – note the use of the plural. For us here on earth God makes it clear that for Him there are no artificial divisions within human society based on tribe or color. Geographically, too, there

is neither East nor West for Him (Surah 2: Verse 115). He is everywhere and belongs to everyone. God made people into different tribes and nations speaking different languages and living in different cultures: All these are signs of God's universal compassion and we must learn to appreciate each other (Surah 5: Verse 48, Surah 30: Verse 22, and Surah 49: Verse 13). He even sent messengers like Abraham who are common to several religions – in this case Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Above all, God declared: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Surah 2: Verse 256).

Everything was from God and the more man was in the image of God the closer he was to fulfilling his destiny and becoming God's "deputy." It is in this context that the idea of merging with God, which finds historic expression in the Sufi dictum *ana al-haqq* or "I am God," can be understood. Although the idea was sacrilegious to the orthodox it was not as far-fetched as it seemed. By God wishing to create divine qualities in man, He was emphasizing the unity and integration of creation itself.²

Of all the attributes developed in human beings, perhaps the greatest is the capacity to make moral choices: Humans are the only species that can turn the other cheek in the face of provocation or speak of peace with others. In their expression of compassion, humans reflect the divine spark that connects them to their maker.

If an angel, skeptical about human beings, were to query God about what humans had achieved in their short history on earth, God could point to His greatest gift to them: creative genius. He could point to the devotion and piety of the Abrahamic prophets; the wisdom of Buddha and Confucius; the building of the pyramids and the Taj Mahal; the human predicament and nobility depicted in the literature of the ages – the Vedas, the *Iliad*, and the

Shakespearean plays; the poetry of Rumi and Ghalib; the discovery of nuclear technology and the marvels of modern science and communications; the inventiveness that allowed humans to fly in the sky, live under water, and walk on the moon. Most of these cases of creativity are invested with moral choices.

Similar moral choices have allowed human beings to use the name of God to wreak violence on others who believed in Him in different ways. Indeed, they were neglectful and cruel even to those who came with His message. Moses returned from Mount Sinai where he had gone to receive God's message to discover that his followers had created a golden calf and were worshipping it. Jesus was tortured and crucified. The Prophet of Islam may have escaped assassination attempts but three of his four successors – good and pious men – did not. Later, the four men most influential in shaping Islamic law were flogged and imprisoned. One died in jail.

God's categories of human behavior

In order to become God's deputy, according to Islam, human beings had to follow two categories of behavior and ensure a balance between them. The first related to rituals and prayers and was primarily designed to create a relationship between man and God. It included the five pillars of Islam: the declaration of belief in God; fasting; praying; paying charity (in cash or in kind); and going on the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime. Although these five pillars required interaction with others they were primarily related to individual action. And they created the conditions to engender the second category of social action.

That second category created, and was embedded in, broader social relations. Of these the most important are

adl (justice), *ihsan* (compassion, kindness and balance), and *ilm* (knowledge; *ilm* is the second most used word in the Quran after the name of Allah or God). But *adl*, justice, was only possible if it was made available in society by judges and rulers. Similarly *ihsan*, compassion or balance, could only be achieved if others in society believed in it and helped to realize it. The acquisition of *ilm*, knowledge, although an individual act, was nonetheless only possible if society provided libraries, colleges, and colleagues to enhance it. Even if knowledge was acquired it was difficult to share or develop in repressive societies. Implementing knowledge meant changing society. Justice, compassion, and knowledge had enormous implications for the kind of society God desired. They also created the preconditions for ideal leadership. A leader who believed in them was a good leader.

Together, the two categories provided the conditions that created a just society. The first category rested on a vertical axis and its primary understanding was through the filter of theology; the second on a horizontal axis and its primary filter was that of anthropology. Together, they formed the Islamic ideal. To discover the ideal we thus need a polythetic, not monothetic, analysis of contemporary Muslim society.

Religious systems must balance individual piety with public interaction. What is important for all of us looking for ways to live together in spite of the different religions and races to which we belong is not so much whether believing in one God (as in the Abrahamic faiths) is better than believing in many gods (Hinduism), or even in no god (Buddhism), but of creating a balanced, compassionate, and harmonious society with decent, caring people in it.

The failure to create a just and compassionate society leads people to fall back to ideas of tribal honor and

revenge. Divisions in society deepen on the basis of blood and custom. Killing and conflict are encouraged. The honor of the group and – if it is attacked – the need to take revenge become more important than worshiping God in peace and engendering compassion in society.

Why is Islam important?

The 21st century will be the century of Islam. The events of September 11 saw to that. The hijackers of the four American planes killed not only thousands of innocent people. Their terrible act also created one of the greatest paradoxes of the 21st century: Islam, which sees itself as a religion of peace, is now associated with murder and mayhem. Consider Islam today: There are about 1.3 billion Muslims living in 55 states (one, for the time being, nuclear; about one-third of the world's Muslims live in non-Muslim countries); about 25 million live in the West (including 7 million in the USA and 2 million in the UK); and Muslim nations are indispensable for American foreign policy (of the nine "pivotal" states on which the United States bases its foreign policy, five are Muslim – see Chase et al. 1996). The Muslim world population is one of the fastest growing. And Islam is the one world religion which appears to be on a collision course with the other world religions.

We know that for the first time in history, due to a unique geopolitical conjunction of factors, Islam is in confrontation with all of the major world religions: Judaism in the Middle East, Christianity in the Balkans, Chechnya, Nigeria, Sudan, and sporadically in the Philippines and Indonesia; Hinduism in South Asia, and, after the Taliban blew up the statues in Bamiyan, Buddhism. The Chinese, whose culture represents an amalgam of the philosophy of Confucius, Tao, and Communist ideology,

are also on a collision course with Islam in China's western province.

It is this historic conjunction that both singles out Islam and creates the global argument that the 21st century will be a time of war between Islam and the other world civilizations. Of course, this neat concept is challenged because so many Muslim countries are clearly allied to non-Muslim ones. Besides, so many Muslims now live in non-Muslim nations. But it is true to say that the major world civilizations are experiencing problems in accommodating or even understanding Islam, both within their borders and outside them.

Whatever the economic, political, and sometimes demographic causes of social transformations on this scale, simplistic ideas often capture the imagination and become the filter through which ordinary people understand them. One such idea has now firmly caught the imagination of people across the world – that there is an ongoing clash between Islam and Western civilization. The argument has been stoked by Harvard professors and by European prime ministers, but it has been around for a thousand years. Whether one adheres to the notion of the clash of civilizations, or whether one chooses dialogue, understanding Islam will be key.

Islamophobia – or a generalized hatred or contempt of Islam and its civilization – appears to be widespread and growing. This is the reality on the ground – however grand and noble even the best-written constitutions and charters. The result is pressure on the Muslim family and on social, political, and even moral life. The consequence is anger, confusion, and frustration; acts of violence result. *Fitna* and *shar*, chaos and conflict, become common. God's vision of a just and compassionate human society remains unfulfilled. Understanding Islam thus becomes important.

The consequences of what happens within Muslim society will be felt by societies everywhere. No one is immune from the debates that now rage around Islam. The issues outlined in this book will concern scholars, policy-makers and ordinary citizens.

Misunderstanding Islam

Yet there is so much misunderstanding of Islam. The debate on Islam that is in full cry in the West since September 11 is too often little more than a parading of deep-rooted prejudices. For example, the critics of Islam ask: "If there is such an emphasis on compassion and tolerance in Islam, why is it associated with violence and intolerance toward non-Muslims³ and the poor treatment of women?"⁴

The answer is that both Muslims and non-Muslims use the Quran selectively. The Quranic verses revealed earlier, for example, Surah 2: Verses 190–4, emphasize peace and reconciliation in comparison to the latter ones like Surah 9: Verse 5. Some activists have argued that this means an abrogation of the earlier verses and therefore advocate aggressive militancy. In fact the verses have to be understood in the social and political context in which they were formed. They must be read both for the particular situation in which they were revealed and the general principle they embody.

Take the first criticism of Islam: that it encourages violence. The actions of the nineteen hijackers had little to do with Islamic theology. Killing a single innocent person is like killing all of humanity, warns the Quran (Surah 5: Verse 32). The Quran clearly preaches tolerance and understanding. Indeed, there is an anthropologically illuminating verse which points to the diversity of races: "O Human Beings! Behold, We have created you all out

of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another . . . The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct" (Surah 49: Verse 13).

The idea of a common humanity is central to the Muslim perception of self. By knowing God as *Rahman* and *Rahim*, Beneficent and Merciful – the two most frequently repeated of God's 99 names, those that God Himself has chosen in the Quran by using them to introduce the chapters – Muslims know they must embrace even those who may not belong to their community, religion, or nation. God tells us in the Quran to appreciate the variety He has created in human society: "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge" (Surah 30: Verse 22).

Verses about fighting Jews and Christians – or Muslims who are considered "hypocrites" – must be understood relative to a specific situation and time frame. What is important for Muslims is to stand up for their rights whoever the aggressor: "Fight against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities," the Quran tells Muslims (Surah 2: Verse 190). Men like bin Laden cite this verse and the next to justify their violence against Jews and Christians in general and in particular the United States, which represents the two religions for them. They give the impression that God wants Muslims to be in perpetual conflict with Jews and Christians. They are wrong. Not only are these verses taken out of context, as they relate to a specific situation at a certain time in the history of early Islam, but the verses that follow immediately after clearly convey God's overarching command: "Make peace with them if they want peace; God is Forgiving, Merciful" (Surah 2: Verses 192–3).

Misguided Muslims and non-Muslims, especially the instant experts in the media, are both guilty of this kind of selective use of the holy text to support their arguments. In this case the Muslims would argue that violence against Jews and Christians is allowed; the non-Muslims would point to this line and say it confirms the hatred of Muslims against others. They imply that the idea of fighting against Islam is therefore justified.

The discussion around the number of women a Muslim man may marry suffers from a similar fate (see below chapter 4, section ii, “Veiled Truth: Women in Islam”). Misguided Muslims cite Surah 4: Verse 3 – “Marry as many women as you wish, two or three or four” – to justify having four wives; misguided non-Muslims, to point to Islam’s licentious nature. Both ignore the next line in the same verse, which insists that each wife be treated equally and with “justice” and, as this is not possible, then one wife is the best arrangement.

“Why do they hate us?”

For many – and not only Muslims – there is another side to the age we live in, one that feeds anger. The images of people being killed in Palestine or Kashmir or Chechnya create helplessness and outrage. Directly or indirectly many people blame the United States. To them, the superpower is morally bankrupt and unwilling to halt the suffering in the world or stop its own obsessive consumerism. The United States was hated long before bin Laden forced George Bush to ask the question, “Why do they hate us?”

At the core of the recent animosity toward Islam were the young Muslims prepared to commit suicide for their beliefs. “Why?” the West asked. The answers flooded the media: “They hate us”; “They envy our lifestyle”; “They hate our democracy.” In a country where psychiatrists hold