# Western stimuli and the rise of militant Islam

By Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov

The role of "Islamic factor" in the international relations has attracted a particular attention of American and Western experts in relationship to contemporary Islam. Islam has become a significant political phenomenon not only in the internal political and social life of the traditionally Islamic countries, since the 1950's and 1970's, but in current international relations as well.
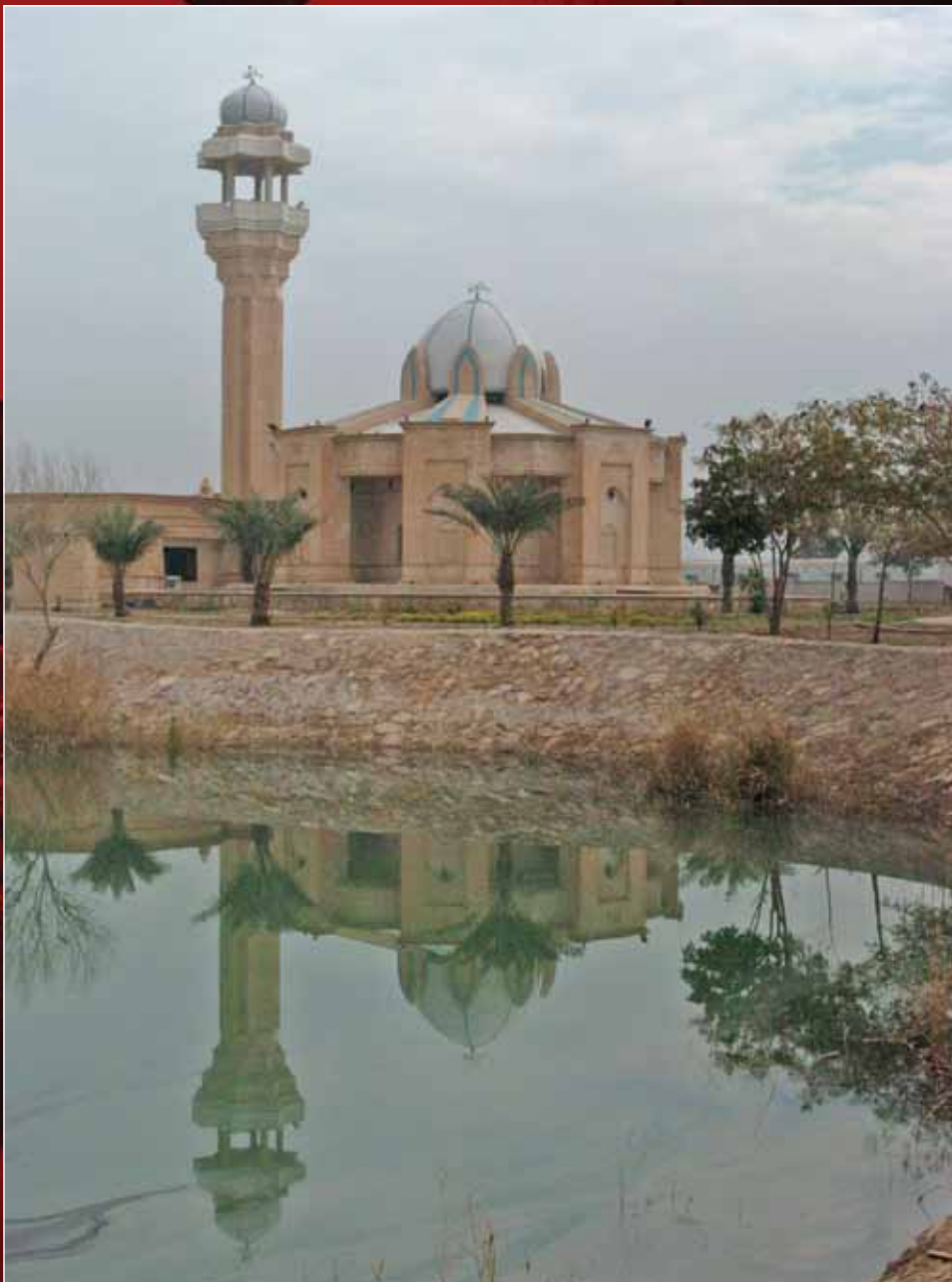
The "Islamic Revivalism" of the 1970's and 1980's mainly consisted of three components, which were the Islamic revolution in Iran, events in and around Afghanistan, and the activation of the Muslim organizations and movements around the world. This period also witnessed the first signs of unification of some anti-Western regimes in the Middle East. As a result, these events have significantly changed the character of international relationships between the traditionally Muslim world and the West.

Over the years, the West has had to deal with a group of countries whose foreign policy is coordinated and integrated around Muslim religious beliefs. Moreover, they had their international organizations partially or entirely based on religious principals such as the Organization of Islamic Conference, The League of Arab Countries, The Regional Union of Development, The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, and the Islamic Bank of Development, among others.

According to Leonard Binder, the traditional perception of "Islamic factor" by U.S. and Western experts on Islam, technological and social progress should have inevitably led to replacement of these religious views by the secular ideologies. Generally, they ultimately expected secularization in the traditionally Muslim societies to prevail. However, the reality is this approach did not happen as expected which compelled most Western researchers of Islam to acknowledge the erroneousness of their original thinking.

In "Iran: Change in Islam, Islam and Change (International Journal of Middle East Studies)," Nikki R. Keddi, an American cultural expert, states (Western scholars) couldn't foresee and expect such a ''strong attack'' of the "Islamic Revivalism" in the late 1970's.

This mosque located on Camp Victory in Baghdad Iraq features Muslim services. (Photo by PVT Matthew Clifton, U.S. Army)

They also realized, with the emergence of Colonel Muammar Kaddafi in Libya with his '' third world theory,'' and the Islamic Revolution in Iran were not just a coincidence of circumstances, but the result of a natural, historical process. In essence, this process consisted of appropriate psychological, socio-political and economic changes in the structure of world's outlook which took shape over centuries in this geopolitical area. Islam had become an integral part of this change in ideology.

The end result was Islam, with its traditional values and culture, emerged to make an ''Islamic civilization.'' Historically, Islamic societies have always played the role of ideological protector for people whose circumstances have differed from the rest of the world's internal political, social, and economic life as a whole; just as Islam has always been a factor of consolidation for various stratums of society. Keddi writes, for these countries, Islam is not only the basis of their morale and discipline; it is also their legal order.

This vitality and ''revivalism'' of Islam can be explained by many factors, in particular by 1) nationalism, 2) peculiarity of Islamic mentality which has taken root in these countries, 3) centuries old cultural heritage and legacy being formed within the Islamic

More than 400 Muslims line up in a massive formation for "Salat el Maghreb," the fourth of five daily prayers in Islam, during Ramadan in Doha, Qatar, Aug. 25. After prayer, they resumed embracing each other while bestowing hopes for peace and happiness. Inside the tent's serving area, food consistent with Gulf-Arab traditions filled each table top: lamb, hummus, bread, rice and salad. Chefs cut and served baby camel meat as requested. (Photo by Dustin Senger, U.S. Army)

Hundreds of Muslims pray together during an Eid al-Adha worship service at Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan, Nov. 16. Eid al-Adha marks the end of Hajj, an annual religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. (Photo by Senior Airman Daryl Knee, U.S. Air Force)

ideology, 4) politicization of Islam, 5) the modernization of Islam, 6) activation of Islamic factor in international relations, and the role of the Western cultural influence.

The first "post-colonial stage" consisted of the representatives of big business circles dominating in power and characterized by "passion" for modernization of social structure, simulation of capitalist and quasi-socialist methods of economic management. Therefore, some kind of "imitation" in accordance with the local conditions of the "Northern" and particularly Western political models and ideas of governance of the state policy was taking place.

The "second stage" of the development of Islamic countries started in the 1970's was termed by the Western experts to be the "Islamic Revivalism." This revivalism reflected the significant changes in the socio-economic and political life of the Muslim countries relatively in a short period of time.

As a result "the Islamic factor" started to play a significant role in the international politics.

In the 1940s and through the 1960s, traditionally Muslim countries, which just gained their political independence, had inherited weak economic and ideological systems. They were mainly characterized by passive participation of different social groups in the political life of these states and the region as a whole. This period was marked by an independent primary search for options for national development in order to overcome the backwardness of their economies and the difficult legacy of feudal and half-feudal relations that currently existed. As a result there were a lot of difficulties and challenges, particularly in the sphere of ideology.

Despite the efforts of Jamal Ad-Din Afghani, who is considered the founding father of Islamic modernism, and Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, the basis of Islam

remained preserved until the end of the 19th century. Their ideological followers also could not fully succeed in effective adaptation of Islam to the requirements of new realities and concepts of social development which if implemented would have overcome the backwardness of their way of life.

Western and American models of economic, political and military development seemed to be attractive for the leading Muslim countries until the mid of the 1950s. But the process of emergence and formation of the national ideology was increasingly taking place in the Islamic societies in the 1950s and 1960s in each of the Muslim countries in specific forms and a different degree of intensity. In the center of this process was Islam which was supposed to be reformed and transformed for requirements of contemporary conditions.

However, it wasn't until the end of the 1960s that the "modernists'" movement

started to take the lead in the reform of Islam. Mostly, their efforts were aimed at revising the interpretation of religious dogmas and conceptions in order to make them more adaptable to the demands of modern living. Overall, these modernists hoped to create a combination of ideology which consisted of contemporary ideas merged with traditional ones. However, this new Islamic theory didn't prevail within the normal functioning of all spheres of the state, public and family life. There was still a connection and a strong tendency in the official ideology of the Muslim countries to limit the use of Islam in the spheres of education, culture and ethics.

In direct opposition to these "modernists," the "traditionalists" who had been consolidating their efforts, stepped up their influence and continued to sway the mainly poor and unsatisfied stratums of the Muslim population to stay within the traditional ideology. Their efforts defended the preservation of traditional Islamic theory and eventually expanded it throughout Muslim countries to make it the dominant ideology. In the course of this struggle between the "modernists" and "traditionalists" a new political stage emerged in the late 1970's called "the Islamic Revivalism."

Since the 70s, the supporters of the "Islamic Revivalism" have been gradually taking more initiative within their country. When the Islamic countries have completed the process of strengthening their national sovereignty and reached a certain level of socio-economic transformations, the tendency was then to start reforming of Islam. But, this change was followed by weakening of the influence of the ideas of "modernists" in the political and philosophical lives of the Islamic societies and started to increase the demand for an alternative and more national ideology based on the fundamentals of Islam. This call for fundamentalism was diametrically opposed to the democratic capitalist system and the Western conception of freedom and liberalism.

The religion of Islam has several sects or branches. The largest denomination of Islam is the Sunni (Sunnah) interpretation, which is based on the belief that the Prophet

SPC Michael McMiller, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, meets with an Iraqi Army unit at the Saddam Mosque prior to conducting a joint operation patrol in Al Zarai, Iraq, Oct. 30. (Photo by SSG JoAnn S. Makinano, U.S. Army)

Muhammad died without appointing a successor to lead the Muslim community (ummah). There are four known main schools within Sunni Islam: Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi'I and Maliki which the majority of Muslims adhere too. Beyond that, the Salafi (from Arabic for "predecessors") movement under the leadership of the Syrian Rashid Rida (1865-1935) followed the activities of Muhammad Abduh and steadily moved towards the type of fundamentalism which later prevailed as a result of the failure in modernization and Westernization of the Muslim societies. Within the broader Salafi movement there is a more extreme Wahhabi sect, named after the eighteen-century thinker Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and inspired by the thirteen-century Syrian theologian Ibn Taymiya.

The Salafi movement rejects many mainstream Islamic traditions as "innovative" and favors a more "pure" Islamic ideology. Organizations such as Hizb at-Tahrir (The Party of Liberation), Al-Qaida (the raising base), Hamaas(enthusiasm), Islamic Jihad (the Holy War), Ikhwan Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) share this same kind of ideology, but have different political agendas.

The withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan and subsequent demise of the Soviet Union, in turn created favorable ground for the next stage in 'Islamic Revivalism." This time it was aimed against the West and its democracy which is based on liberalism, freedom, initiative and opportunity at the individual level. The culmination of this stage was 9/11 events in the U.S.

Additional factors for the present increase of anti-Western sentiments in Muslim communities are the outdated legal and security mechanisms which do not allow mainstream Muslims to effectively operate against Muslim radicals who live throughout Europe and other parts of the world. These radical sects openly regard liberal democracy as "haram" or that which is forbidden by God.

As a result, Europe is now beginning to realize the dangers of alienating its Muslim population. Because of insufficient immigration systems and the lack of providing meaningful and active roles for Muslim residents in the economic, social and political life of their respective countries of residence, these Muslim populations are now at risk for radical recruitment. Multiculturalism of the European societies would be an effective mechanism to prevent the radicalization of these Islamic communities.

The current situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya Somalia and other places are ironically helping the radical Islamist groups to recruit new members justifying that it's a "war against Muslims."

An Iraqi policeman walks before the Mosul Mosque, located in downtown Mosul, which is the largest mosque in this city of roughly 1.7 million residents. In a city of historic mosques, temples and cathedrals, the Mosul Mosque is relatively new, originally planned and founded by Saddam Hussein; the building is not yet completely finished. (Photo by SGT Patrick Lair, U.S. Army)

The Blue Mosque in Khakrez, Afghanistan. Villagers and many Afghan families visit this well known Mosque to say prayers. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Carmen A. Cheney, U.S. Air Force)

The hearts and minds of all Muslims must be won. It is only by doing so that the West will be able to prevent the spread of militant Islam. If Muslims should become equal members of the Multicultural Western societies, the militant concept of "Western conspiracy" against Muslim societies would lose its ground.

A great example of why to work against "alienation" of Muslim societies comes from relations with Turkey. This nation is an important ally and the only Muslim member of NATO. Turkey lies in a strategic location next to Iraq, and other Arab countries, as well as Iran, Afghanistan and the Muslim republics of the former USSR. The failure to accept Turkey to the European Union could further alienate the country and create the favorable conditions for radical Islamic trends to germinate, allowing radicals to explore the concept of "Christian West conspiracy" against "Muslim Turkey." In fact, anti-Western and anti-American sentiments in the Turkish society are currently at a record high.

The traditionally Muslim republics of the former USSR, which include Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizstan, Azerbaijan are also going to be very important for the global geopolitics in decades to come. For example, the recent bloody revolt and regime change in Kirgizstan, a small former Soviet Central Asian Republic, which hosts the major U.S. air base "Manas" for military operations in Afghanistan, caused a lot of concern among U.S. officials. In April, 2010, Stephanie Gaskell with the Daily News reported statements of some its leaders of the new interim government indicated the lease for the U.S. air base could not be extended after its expiration.

This is a clear example of how a wrong message and the lack of relevant engagement on the part of the West can create challenges in a strategically important part of the world.

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As a former high-ranking diplomat, he helped open the first embassy of Azerbaijan in Washington, D.C., and while working for the U.S. Department of State, he instructed diplomats in languages and cultures. He also provided vital assistance as a multi-lingual cultural adviser to U.S. forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom II and became the subject of a Department of Defense newsreel, "Jack of all Languages." Dr. Ibrahimov specializes in the cultural issues of the former Soviet Republics, south central Asia, and the Middle East. He is the author of, "An Invitation to Rain: A Story of the Road Taken Toward Freedom," and numerous other publications.