prejudices against marginalized groups (see pp. 271–74). Finally, Marica Hermansen, echoing the sentiments of all the other contributors, advocates the urgent need to move away from what she calls “identity Islam,” a narrow obsession with communal boundaries, to uncover the moral and spiritual dimensions that lie at the core of Islam (see pp. 306–318).

Not everyone would agree, of course, with all that the *Progressive Muslims* has to say. One can find the very notion of ‘progressive’ Muslims problematic at a theoretical level. It might even be thought of as an elitist project, and as suggesting that all other Muslims are necessarily ‘regressive,’ or at best, ‘static.’ The somewhat curt manner reflecting at certain points in editor Omid Safi’s “Introduction” might, to some, sound a bit hubristic also. But, as one goes through the book, one finds the study rooted in logic and reason, triggered by the distress that came in the wake of modernity, and more recently, in the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. The contributors to the book warn us that the traditional and pathological understandings of Islam that continue to surface and hold sway, pose serious threat to the future of Muslims. It is with this concern that they stress the urgency of articulating visions of the faith that critically engage the multiple challenges of modernity, based on the fundamental Qur’anic teachings of harmony, justice and equality. To that end, the book offers a very incisive critique and highlights the compelling need for a wholesome and rational approach to the issues.

Khalid Mahmood


Since the end of the cold war and the beginning of a new set of relationships in the world, scholars have been concerned to understand the meaning, nature and purpose of this changed relationship. This book is Mahmood Mamdani’s contribution to its understanding and, as the theme suggests, it tackles one of the modern manifestations — terrorism — underpinning it as well as the widely held view that it is inherently embedded in the cultural identity kit of Muslims. Mamdani locates the objective of the book in the relationship
between cultural and political identity and in the context of 9/11, between religious fundamentalism and political terrorism and explains the political events, above all 9/11, in the light of political encounters in their historical context rather than as the outcome of stubborn cultural legacies (p. 11).

The import here is that there is nothing inherently violent and terror-driven in Islam except what emerged in the process of contact between the political actors in the course of time. This is explained in the first part of the book which offers a critique of the cultural interpretations of politics and suggests a different way of thinking about political Islam. It traces the development of different legacies including the recent rise of terrorist movements.

The book is divided into four chapters with an introduction and conclusion which are self-explanatory. Modernity and violence conceptualise the work as an introduction and the conclusion describes the prevailing situation as that of impunity and collective punishment. Chapter one deals with culture talk or how not to talk about Islam and politics. The analysis of the cold war after Indochina forms chapter two; Afghanistan, the high point in the cold war, is chapter three, and the final chapter tackles the transition from proxy war to open war.

Why was it necessary for the United States to distinguish between Good Muslim and Bad Muslim? Mamdani’s work sets out to answer this question which was the consequence of the end of the cold war and the beginning of a new kind of war where the sole superpower, USA, battles a sizable portion of the world defined in a new term as terrorists or harbouring terrorists. Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man captured the optimism expressed in the West following the demise of the Soviet system. Fukuyama had argued that the survival of the US and the free market democracy it championed was a demonstration of the resilience of the system and that the rest of humanity had no choice but to enlist on the train. This optimism was not shared by Samuel Huntington who saw the next level of post-cold war struggle from a cultural perspective where the Judeo-Christian civilization would have to confront the Islamic eastern civilization in what he termed “the clash of civilizations.” Huntington set the tone for the confrontation between the two cultures whose misrepresentation this work sets out to correct.

The current contest between the cultures owed its origin to the policies pursued by the United States in the age of the cold war which laid the foundation of the current clash following the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001. Mamdani’s work is not the first to trace this alliance of interests producing the current standoff between the former partners. John Cooley’s Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism published in
1999 also examined this relationship. What is unique about Mamdani’s work is his use of the present rhetorics of the Bush administration in distinguishing between good and bad Muslims to focus attention on the blame game. At the inauguration of the alliance it was dubbed as the ‘holy war’ and each group had its own definition of what constituted holy war. This was kept as a closely guarded secret until the Soviet menace ended in 1989. Subsequently the true holy war began when the skills cultivated in the Afghan campaign was deployed into teaching the “great satan” a lesson.

Implicit in Mamdani’s essay is an attempt to determine the political correctness of what, in today’s world, is described as racial profiling — the attempt to equate specific crimes with specific groups. In other words, how true is the idea that Arabs and Muslims should be identified with terrorism? In answering this question, the work undertakes a historical journey of the present manifestation of terrorism. The United States’ cultivation of terrorism as an official policy began during the cold war period through proxy wars in Indochina, Southern Africa, Central America and finally Afghanistan where it blossomed. In his own words, the US’s embrace of terror can be plotted as a learning curve that went through three successive phases of the late cold war, from Southern Africa to Central America and Central Asia. Each phase can be identified with a distinct lesson. If the patronage of terror in the opening phase was shy, more like the benign and permissive tolerance of the practices of an aggressive regional ally — apartheid South Africa — the US moved to a bold and brazen embrace of terror when it came to the counter-revolutionaries in Central America, combining it with the patronage of illicit trade in cocaine as the preferred way of financing its covert operations. It was, however, in the closing phase of the cold war that the US came to see the embrace of terror as the means to an international public good. It did this in two ways: by privatising and internationalising the means of operations of war. Whereas both trends were already present in the US support of the Contras, each truly blossomed only with the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, which was so ideologised that it was seen less as a national liberation struggle and more as an international religious crusade: a jihad (p. 118).

President Bush had himself described the war on terror as a “crusade” in the rhetoric spewed immediately after the nine-eleven tragedy but was compelled to beat a retreat because of its political incorrectness. It was part of the general trend of discussion in post 9/11 America where the impression on the ground was of a great power having suddenly been struck down by amnesia. Mass amnesia is part of the statecraft of the government that fed its citizens with information that had been distilled of its potential for harm. Differentiating between good and bad Muslims was an attempt to mollify the
impact on Americans and the rest of the world of the impression that all Muslims are terrorists. It was a positive generic of the US moral high ground seen in the tags it created for the rest of the world such as “evil empire,” “rogue states,” “state sponsors of terror” and the “axis of evil.” Mamdani argued that the President assured Americans that good Muslims were anxious to clear their names and consciences of the horrible crime and would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them.’ Mamdani opines that the import of the statement was that unless one was proved to be good, every Muslim was presumed to be bad; therefore, all Muslims were now under obligations to prove their credentials by joining in a war against bad Muslims (p. 15).

Mamdani asserts that the Islamist terror that prevails today is more a mutation than an outgrowth of Islamic history. It is the result of a triple confluence of ideological, organisational and political elements. The ideological element was the product of an encounter between Islamist intellectuals and different Marxist-Leninist ideals that embraced armed struggles in the post-war period. The organisational element was a direct consequence of the American decision to organise the Afghan jihād as a quasi-private international crusade. The political element is a consequence of the demonization of Islam and its equation with terrorism, a tendency that emerged after the cold war and gathered momentum after 9/11.

All these were the consequences of the contact shaped politically rather than culturally. The Afghan jihād alone created the polls from which the 9/11 attacks occurred and from which subsequent attacks on both western targets and targets sympathetic to them occurred. In substantiating this claim, Mamdani’s work is full of anecdotes one of which stated that “your government participated in creating a monster. Now it has turned against you and the world: 16,000 Arabs were trained in Afghanistan, made into a veritable killing machine” (p. 140). Almost all attacks bore the trade marks of Afghan veterans most of whom had nowhere to return to except to internationalise the jihād. The American jihād claimed to create an Islamic infrastructure of liberation but in reality forged an infrastructure of terror that used Islamic symbols to tap into Islamic networks and communities (p. 130).

The cost of the cultivation of the infrastructure of terror is the mindless violence all over the Middle East, especially the frontline states. As for the US, in her attempt to break free of the restraints imposed by legislative oversight, the executive branch had cultivated private means of funding through the drug trade and the use of al-Qaeda. The first impact of this policy was the erosion of democracy at home. Its second impact was the creation of an infrastructure of terror, international in scope, free of any effective state control and
wrapped up in the rhetoric of religious war. In distinguishing between ‘their terrorism’ and ‘our terrorism,’ it turned out that ‘their’ terrorism was born out of ‘ours.’ The best known of the CIA trained terrorist is Osama bin Laden, a creation of the CIA and wanted by the FBI. The third impact was the development of a parallel infrastructure of criminality connected with the international development of illicit drug trade.

It will be recalled that the United States has been in the forefront of promoting the attempt to eradicate narcotic trade all over the world and promoting the rule of law. These concerns for rule of law, however, became secondary whenever it threatened the success of its political programme. Thus while the US narcotic agency was busy working against narcotic trade, the Central Intelligence Agency provided shelter and protection to warlords brazenly engaged in it. It also allowed the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence to operate opium refining facilities all over the area. In deciding to rely on private armies outside the reach of the Congress, the government was subverting the rule of law. In any case, the processes served the overall interests of the United States.

Who bears the historic responsibility for the emergence and internationalization of terrorism? Mamdani contrasts two situations — after the Second World War and after the cold war. The Second World War was fought in Europe and Asia and not in the United States. Europe and Asia thus faced physical and civic destruction at the end of the war, a situation that America did not face. The question of responsibility for post-war reconstruction arose as a political rather than a moral question. Its urgency in Europe was underscored by the changing political situations particularly in Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece. Faced with the possibility of enhanced Communist influence, the United States accepted responsibility for restoring the conditions required for decent civic life in non-Communist Europe. The result was the Marshall plan (p. 250).

The cold war was largely not fought in Europe but in what came to be called the Third World through a war that was mostly covert. Should we, ordinary humanity, hold official America responsible for its actions during the cold war? Should official America be held responsible for napalm bombing and spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos? Should it be held responsible for the environment of impunity that nurtured terrorist movements in Southern Africa, Central Africa and Central Asia? Mamdani argues that civilization cannot be built just on forgetting: “not only must we learn to forget, we must also not forget to learn. We must also memorialise crimes that are monumental. America was built on two monumental crimes: the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans.
The United States tends to memorialise other peoples’ crimes, not its own — to seek a high moral ground as a pretext to ignore real issues” (p. 253).

The import of all this is that the United States seems to feel no responsibility for the devastation it wrought on the area. This was a tradition of the United States as was the case in Vietnam and other conflict zones. Since the area so devastated was way outside the reach of the United States the people were left to live with the consequences. But unlike the case of Vietnam, the Afghan jihad is snowballing back and threatening the Americans because those behind the Twin Towers’ bombing and numerous acts of terrorism were trained and provisioned by America. The world is indeed becoming a global village. The fact that the US is bogged down in Afghanistan and the adjoining areas is an indication that the responsibility for the crisis will not remain that of the people alone. The casualty rate has been increasing since the war on terror began and the domestic consequences are telling on the administration. Indeed America forgets too soon that after the humiliating defeat it suffered in Vietnam, its amnesia is leading it into another blind alley in a war it stands no chance of winning.

This work is a contribution to understanding the role of the United States not only in exacerbating conflicts before, during and after the cold war but also in her deliberate cultivation of ignorance and in the reconstruction of a history that is distortive of reality. This is further abetted by her hold over information dissemination processes. Is it out of place to declare that in view of the pains caused to the rest of the world by Christians that it is now time to separate good Christians from bad Christians? The work adopts a perspective that provides a refreshing departure from previous works. It provides a general and specific guide to different audiences interested in the problem of insecurity confronting the world and America’s contribution to it.

Adoyi Onoja

★★★★