Washington Mosque on 17 September, 2001, might have marked “the advent of a new era of public discourse about jihad in the West” (p. xi). It did not.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


*With God on Our Side: Politics & Theology of the War on Terrorism* is the new and substantially revised edition of Aftab Ahmad Malik’s earlier book *Shattered Illusions*. According to the well-known scholar, John L. Esposito, the book “rises to the challenge of addressing the critical issues and questions that continue to affect relations between the Muslim world and the West post 9/11, from examining the causes and costs of the war on Iraq; the realities and myths of international terrorism; the multiple and interrelated roles and influence of neo-conservatives and the militant Christian Zionist Right to the theological sources of Muslim violence and extremism, and the influences and realities of US policy in the Middle East (p. xxxvii).”

The title of the book has been borrowed from Bob Dylan who said: “You never ask questions When God’s on your side” (p. i). Interestingly enough, an Urdu poet of late 19th and early 20th century, Akbar Allâbâdî, had offered almost similar comments on the cultural confrontation originated in the sub-continent with the invasion of India by British colonialists:

Ham us kē sāth hai kih Khudā jis kē sāth hai
Par āntē nahī kih Khudā kis kē sāth hai
(We are with the group who has God on its side but we do not know on whose side God is!).

What the Urdu poet had said about a hundred years back is true even today as the peace loving people of the world (on either side of the new divide created after the dismemberment of Soviet Russia), do not know as to where the truth lies. It is here that an objective and unbiased academic discussion on various aspects of the ‘War on Terrorism’ and tangential issues can help people
in formulating a considered view. Aftab Malik’s book is an important contribution in this area.

The compendium consists of 23 articles, 18 of which appear to have been written exclusively for the book, while the remaining 5 are re-print. The articles have been organized in four specific parts, which have been discussed briefly in this review.

An unusual aspect of the book is that it contains 5 explanatory articles covering 83 pages, before the start of the actual papers that make the book. One is a small ‘preface’ written by the Editor, while two ‘forewords’ have been written by John L. Esposito and two ‘introductions’ by Khaled Abou El Fadl. These papers do provide a comprehensive reaction to the ‘War on Terrorism’ and help in understanding the substantive articles included in the book, and are valuable on their own merit but make the introductory portion too long and at places repetitive. This has perhaps diluted some of the bite of the book. In my view, it would have been better if only the foreword written by John Esposito for the new edition had been included in the book and the remaining three papers excluded. More so, as a separate paper on ‘Islam and the Theology of Power’ by Khaled Abou El Fadl also appears in Part IV of the book.

Part I of the book “Words of Mass Deception” comprises of five articles and tries to establish that the US government was using a policy of mass deception by linking attack on Iraq as an essential component of the war on terror. According to Bill and Kathleen Christison, the attack on Iraq “has less to do with weapons of mass destruction than with implementing an ambitious US vision to redraw the map of the Middle East. The new map would be drawn with an eye to two main objectives: controlling the flow of oil and ensuring Israel’s continued regional military superiority (p. 77).” The Articles included in this part, effectively highlight these aspects and support the Christison’s point of view. One of the papers “The Price of Freedom in Iraq” by Ceara Donnelly & William D. Hartung (pp. 51–66) discusses, at length, an important socio-economic fallout of the Iraq war — the corruption of American politically connected business firms, an interesting subject which perhaps falls outside the scope of the book.

Part II “Myths and Realities” consists of six papers which discuss certain basic facts and narrations made about the ‘War on Terror’, especially with reference to the role of Israel in the game. Aftab Malik’s paper on “The Betrayal of Traditions” perhaps falls more in the domain of theology than of current politics, and seems to be out of tune. On the whole, the papers included in this part succeed in highlighting some of the internal inconsistencies in the American strategy.
To me, Part III of the Book titled as “Unholy Alliance” and consisting of seven articles is the core of the book and discusses the theological issues which motivated the neo-conservatives, Christian Right and Christian Zionists to evolve and formulate their attitude towards so-called “Muslim Terrorism.” The articles included in this part provide substantial evidence to show that:

- Religion has always had an enormous, if indirect and under-recognized role in US policy formulation.
- Certain elitist groups in US believe that the State of Israel is the fulfilment of divine promises in the Bible pertaining to the Jewish people and as such it is the responsibility of their government to protect Israel and safeguard its interests in the Middle East.
- The new Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war has altered and confused the existing relationship between nation, church, and God, within American administration with serious consequences; and
- The focus of “war on terrorism” has shifted swiftly from al-Qa’ida to Iraq, which had nothing alike in them save their ‘Muslimness.’ This could shift to Syria, or Iran or Pakistan tomorrow, and could lead to explosive situations.

The last part of the book “Shattering Illusion” includes five articles and represents the moderate Muslim point of view to the ‘War on Terrorism.’ The papers conclude that “three principal elements have been responsible for shaping the modern Western world’s conception of Islam: Firstly, a recycled Christian memory of Islam that has remained active even in the era of secularization. The medieval Christian view of Islam as a deviant non-rational religion continues to survive in a ‘secularized’ frame work. Secondly, the shift in the balance of power in favour of modern west, followed by an international order that gave an upper hand to the European powers over the rest of the globe, mainly in the south Mediterranean hemisphere. And finally, the deep crises and high level of political disintegration that accompanied the accelerated regress of the Ottoman Empire, and which, since the beginning of 19th century, have come to characterize the whole Muslim world (p. 292).”

The common trail in between the selected articles, some of which have been admirably written, is that the new American initiative on “War on Terror” has not only created a serious threat perception to the Muslim world, it may also result in a retreat of the Western concepts of secularism, liberalism and equality as propounded by the French Revolution and accepted by the modern West as the guiding philosophy of the new world order. The retreat may result in repression, discrimination, and segregation of non-white population in general and the Muslims in particular. The ‘War on Terrorism’
is therefore an issue with serious concern for all, as it is a war with no apparent end in view and in which both sides are going to be a loser, one losing its human and physical assets and the other losing its distinctive values. To most of the people of the Third World, Terrorism is the by-product of American policy in the Middle East and as such can only be tamed by securing a durable peace agreement in the region. If it is not done in right earnest, the bridge between the US and the Third World may soon become a bridge too far. The book successfully conveys this concern.

The book also contains two small but important omissions which may be attended to in the next edition. Firstly, the ‘Contents’ show that the book has been organized into four parts, while in the main text ‘Part’ has been substituted by ‘Chapter’. Secondly, Jim Wallis’ article “Dangerous Religion” which is the 17th paper has been serialized as the 16th (p. 247). Hence there are two papers with the same number.

Ather Zaidi


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Muslims are the largest religious minority in the Philippines, constituting between 5 to 8% of the total population of 88 million people. Islam arrived in the Philippines in the thirteenth century and the local Muslims are popularly