Reflections on 9/11 Ten Years Later

—–Salim Mansur

As the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 recede further into the past, historians and others will seek to make sense of what occurred on that calm late summer morning where a mighty superpower was taken by surprise and to explain the significance of the event in terms of world history. Future historians, however, will have a better perspective of 9/11 and of the consequences that followed. They will be better situated to dispassionately assess 9/11 than we are today. Our perspective is complicated by the outrage that still remains with us, as we can readily recall our own horror in watching in real time on television hijacked jetliners ploughing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

Time is needed to assess events of such magnitude. One is reminded of the alleged reply given by Chou En-lai, the premier of Communist China, when asked what he thought of the French Revolution. He said it was too soon to tell. Ten years after the operatives of al Qaeda attacked America, the Arab-Muslim world finds itself gravely shaken by popular uprisings toppling dictators and confounding governments in what has been characterized as an “Arab spring.” Again, it is too early to state that the “Arab spring” is the consequence that none imagined when hijacked jetliners were flown into tall buildings.

However, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 did not erupt out of the blue. The nineteen hijackers of the four American jetliners were Arab men and Muslims selected by the leadership of al Qaeda, and financed and trained for such an operation. Their mission was an act of war as carefully planned as the attack sixty years earlier on December 7, 1941 by the Japanese imperial navy on Pearl Harbor. The differences in the two acts of aggression are many, but the one striking fact is that the United States in both instances came to be viewed as the enemy to be drawn into war.

The varying responses of the government and the people of the United States to these two aggressions speak volumes about how greatly American society changed in those intervening years. But what is of greater interest is that most Americans on that September morning were just as unaware of the intense turmoil raging within the Muslim world in general and, in particular, the Middle East, as were Americans in December 1941 of Japanese politics and of the extent to which Japan was already militarily engaged in the Asian mainland.

The Jefferson Lecture established by the National Endowment for the Humanities is “the highest honour the [U.S.] federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities.” The 1990 Jefferson Lecturer was Bernard Lewis, generally recognized as the most distinguished living scholar of Islam, Muslims and the Middle East. Lewis’s lecture was a far ranging survey of the Muslim world aimed at explaining – a decade before 9/11 would occur – an
increasingly hostile attitude of Muslims in general, and especially of those in the Middle East, towards the West, and in particular the United States. This lecture was subsequently published in the September 1990 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* under the heading “The Roots of Muslim Rage.”

The “Muslim rage” was evident in the 1979 Iranian revolution that brought about the overthrow of the Shah and the monarchy. The revolution turned Islamic and anti-West under the leadership of an aging cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, about whom most Americans, including those in government, knew very little. The Shah had been a loyal ally of the U.S. in a region endowed with oil resources that gave it immense strategic importance. The same year, in November, there was a siege of Ka’aba, the holy mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, by armed Muslim militants enraged by the perceived corruption of the royal family and the influence of the West inside the kingdom. Ka’aba is the holiest site in Islam, and the location of the annual Muslim pilgrimage. Its siege caused a terrible shock to the Muslim world and the violence that followed its lifting caused an even greater one. Two years later, in October 1981, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was killed while attending a military parade. His killer was an Egyptian officer belonging to an extremist Muslim fundamentalist party, and the reason for Sadat’s murder was the peace treaty he had signed two years earlier with Israel and which ended more than three decades of hostility between the two countries.

There was more popular unrest, violence, terrorism and war raging in the Middle East and across the Muslim world. The list is long. Independence from European colonial rule had had consequences contrary to expectations; and unrest among Muslims was a symptom of their anger, disillusionment, and frustration. Independence did not bring any improvement in the prevailing social and economic conditions for the majority of the people. Instead the situation kept deteriorating as population grew exponentially and, with it, poverty. The promise of freedom and democracy following the end of colonialism had been belied by the phenomenon of single party rule and dictatorship. There were wars – Arab states against Israel, Pakistan against India – and non-Muslim armies repeatedly humiliated the military forces of Muslim countries.

Lewis briefly reviewed this prevalent condition of the Muslim world in his Jefferson Lecture. He described with much sympathy the sense of Muslim frustration, or rage, arising from the failure to meet the requirements of modernity the West had pioneered in politics, arts and sciences. As a historian, Lewis spoke of Islam as “one of the world’s great religions”, emphasizing that it “has brought comfort and peace of mind to countless millions of men and women”. He went on to note that Islam “has given dignity and meaning to drab and impoverished lives. It has taught people of different races to live in brotherhood and people of different creeds to live side by side in reasonable tolerance. It inspired a great civilization in which others besides Muslims lived creative and useful lives and which, by its achievement, enriched the whole world.” But as the last century entered its final decade, Lewis found that the internal causes of Muslim unrest had generated a collective anger and a mood of hostility against the West. This mood, fuelled by past humiliations suffered at the hands of Western powers, had turned ominous.

Although a non-Muslim and an outsider, Lewis read the pulse of the Muslim world well. He was not alone, however. There were Muslim thinkers who had reflected on the condition of their culture and civilization, and recognized how large the extent of Muslim backwardness was relative to the non-
Muslim West. The disparity between the West and Islam or the Muslim world was so vast that it raised the question of whether the latter had become moribund and decrepit and, more specifically, whether Muslims might have to jettison their culture in order to embrace modernity and follow the West.

In the early years of the last century and before the First World War turned Europe into a killing field, Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938) spoke in verses of immense power, beauty and passion about the malaise of the Muslim world. Iqbal was of Indian birth and wrote his poetry in Urdu and Persian. He is considered one of the most important Muslim thinkers in modern history and revered as the poet-philosopher of Pakistan. In his controversial, yet frequently cited, two long poems, Shikwa (“Complaint”) and Jawab-i-Shikwa (“Answer to the Complaint”), Iqbal discussed the bitter Muslim failure to maintain the dynamism of Islam and its civilizational values. In “Answer”, Iqbal makes God respond derisively to Muslims complaining of being ignored and forgotten despite their worshipping Him through adversity. God, in Iqbal’s stirring verses, reminds Muslims they succeeded when they remained dynamic in their thought and action, when they were bold in taking risks and being creative, when they led rather than followed.

Iqbal was a great admirer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the modern Turkish Republic following the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War. Kemal was an ardent modernizer, an enthusiast in adopting Western values in culture and politics, and he abolished religious rule based on Sharia (Islamic laws codified in the early centuries of Muslim history). Iqbal was not alone in advocating reform that might restore some dynamism in Muslim culture and politics, and re-awaken Islamic civilization from its stupor. There was also Malek Bennabi (1905-73), an Algerian born in Constantine and educated in Paris. Bennabi sought to understand the causes for the decay of Islam as a civilization and concluded, as did Iqbal, that the loss of internal dynamism and critical thought had impoverished Muslims. He conceived of history in cyclical terms: once a civilization was born, it experienced growth, expansion, contraction, loss of movement and demise. Of the Islamic civilization, Bennabi observed that, once the Qur’anic impulsion “deadened, little by little the Muslim world came to a stop like a motor that had consumed its last litre of petrol.”

During the first half of the twentieth century, the views of Muslim thinkers such as Iqbal and Bennabi were ascendant within the Muslim world. As Lewis commented, “At first the Muslim response to Western civilization was one of admiration and emulation – an immense respect for the achievements of the West, and a desire to imitate and adopt them.” But there was an alternative view among Muslims taking shape. It rejected the West and all of its cultural and political values. It hearkened back to an idealized view of the first century of Islam (7th-8th century C.E.), when the Arab-Islamic Empire was in the making and the template of the Islamic civilization was laid by Arab rulers. It viewed the West as an implacable enemy of Islam and Muslims, and it set its goals as driving the Western powers out of the Muslim lands and bringing to an end Western influence among Muslims. It spoke about the necessity of jihad (holy war) to achieve its goal of returning Muslim lands to the rule of Sharia. The most prominent exponents of this view were two Egyptians, Hassan al-Banna (1906-49), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Syed Qutb (1906-66), and the Indo-Pakistani Maulana Mawdudi (1903-79), the founder of Jamaat-i-Islami. In Iran Ayatollah
Khomeini (1902-89) would emerge as the most prominent exponent of this view in the Shi’ite tradition.

For the first couple of decades following the end of colonialism in the Muslim world, there was a concerted effort to bring about rapid modernization through the adoption of Western ideas. There was keen interest in building heavy industries, constructing dams and hydro-electric projects, encouraging urbanization, expanding communication networks, investing in higher education, raising modern armies. But these efforts were not matched by an equally ardent commitment of the ruling elites to embracing democracy and establishing representative governments based on popular will. The result was an eventual collision between those who espoused modernization and those who opposed it because of the dislocations it brought to traditional societies.

In explaining the reversal of Muslim reformers and modernizers, Lewis observed the following in his Jefferson Lecture: “For vast numbers of Middle Easterners, Western-style economic methods brought poverty, Western-style political institutions brought tyranny, even Western-style warfare brought defeat. It is hardly surprising that so many were willing to listen to voices telling them that the old Islamic ways were best and that their only salvation was to throw aside the pagan innovations of the reformers and return to the True Path that God had prescribed for his people.” In 1981 V.S. Naipaul, a controversial but highly acclaimed author and novelist, published an account of his travels in Muslim lands as the Iranian revolution unfolded. Unlike Lewis’s grand historical survey, Naipaul’s Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey was an eye-witness report of the Muslim world in turmoil. Naipaul’s journey brought him to Tehran in the midst of the crisis when Iranian students, following the revolutionary line of Ayatollah Khomeini’s politics wrapped in the language of Islam, took fifty U.S. embassy staff and held them as hostages. Naipaul described the situation as if “the Muslim world had been on the boil.” The 1979 Iranian revolution was a tipping point for the Muslim world. The Muslim modernizing reformers rapidly lost ground. In 1971, Pakistan, then the most highly populated Muslim state, broke apart as a result of a bloody civil conflict and a self-destructive war with India. Modernization, or what supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami saw as imitating the West, had proven to be hollow and counter-productive, just as their leaders had predicted. The “Muslim rage,” which Lewis described so well, swept across Muslim lands, and with it came the consensus that the civilizational challenge Islam confronted could be met by a return to its past. This consensus was reflected in the Cairo Declaration of August 5, 1990 signed by the foreign ministers of the member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This OIC document made it abundantly clear that all rights and freedoms for Muslims as set forth in the Cairo Declaration were derived from the Sharia and that “the Sharia is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification to any of the articles of this Declaration.”

By the time the second millennium drew to an end, the internal unrest in the Muslim world was reaching a breaking point. The decade long war between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Khomeini’s Iran in the 1980s displayed the ferocity of sectarian Muslim conflict, as did the conflict inside Pakistan a decade earlier. The Arab states were divided over how to maintain confrontation with Israel once Egypt made peace with the Jewish state. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and the long war it set in motion, aroused Islamic sentiments and, ironically in this instance, Muslim passion was boosted by the U.S. based on the logic of the West’s Cold War rivalry with Soviet Communism.
Moscow’s admission of defeat in Afghanistan and the Soviet withdrawal from that troubled Islamic country emboldened militant Muslims, who insisted their jihad had defeated a military superpower. These Muslim warriors took the message of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami to its logical extreme. Like the Bolsheviks in 1917, al Qaeda’s jihadists were revolutionaries in a hurry. They wanted to push history on their terms. They argued confrontation with the West and its most powerful representative, the United States, was inevitable, and they planned to precipitate it. A return to authentic Islam, to a time and place before the cradle of Islam had become contaminated by the West and its corrupt ways, required jihad. And so al Qaeda developed as a network of the most militant Muslims in a political climate of spreading Muslim rage. Driven by its own utopian view of an Islamic society that rejects modern values of democracy and secularism, it prepared for an asymmetrical war in which terrorism would be the weapon of the warriors of God.

The collapse of the Soviet Union caught the West by surprise. Some saw the end of the Cold War as the end of history. Americans turned inwards after the long, demanding and exhaustive effort that had gone into the containment of Soviet Communism. Few in the West paid serious attention to the troubles brewing inside the Muslim world.

September 11, 2001 was a return of history with a vengeance. One is not mistaken in viewing 9/11 as an evil act committed by evil men posing as men of faith acting for a cause driven by faith. But as noted earlier, 9/11 did not come out of the blue. Terrorism in the name of Islam is the symptom of a civilization wrestling with its own demise.

The modern world that Muslims might wish for cannot be “un-invented.” Despite their rage, Muslims face a challenge in this new century which is essentially the same as that perceived by Iqbal at the beginning of the last century and somewhat similar to the one Christians and Christendom had to confront over five hundred years ago. This challenge consists in determining how to maintain faith in the face of the new advances in philosophy and science. Christianity met the challenge at the dawn of a new age that came to be defined as the Enlightenment by separating the realms of faith and politics. Once it has overcome its rage, the Muslim world will do well to draw on the experience of Christianity with modernity and to work out its own rapprochement with the world of the third millennium.

The Muslim world cannot remain in a boil indefinitely. There is no ready answer to how a civilization can be repaired, and there is no expert around to suggest an action plan, nor any precedent to suggest how this may be done. But the Muslim world must find a way of adapting its customs and values to the requirements of the modern world, and this will be its burden for much of the present century. The irony is that, as the Muslim world confronts its existential problems, the West will also remain involved and will be affected, as illustrated by 9/11. Consequently, the West must, as it did for its relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, work out a prudent, safe and firm set of policies for its relationship with the Muslim world in the years ahead.

By way of conclusion, it may be worthwhile recalling the sage advice of Bernard Lewis from his Jefferson Lecture. Lewis counselled his audience, “This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the
perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival.”

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