UNDERSTANDING TERROR:
A REVIEW OF MAHMOOD MAMDANI'S *GOOD MUSLIM, BAD MUSLIM*

by

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*T*his paper aims to discuss the major ideas in Mahmood Mamdani's latest book '*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*'. A highly-respected political scientist and anthropologist at Columbia University, Mamdani has written on postcolonial politics, political violence, and democracy and justice in his earlier works.

In '*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*', Mamdani offers a critique of the cultural interpretation of politics and suggests a different way of thinking about political Islam in the events surrounding 9/11. Rather than illustrating a deep-seated clash of civilisations, Mamdani argues that 9/11 came out of a recent history, that of the late Cold War. Those familiar with Noam Chomsky's recent work will probably find that Mamdani makes similar arguments. Where Mamdani is unique and particularly compelling, however, is in drawing on his African-studies background to back up his assertions about violence, terrorism and Islam.

The main point that Mamdani makes in the book is that Islamist political violence emerged as a result of particular historical and political circumstances. However, instead of problematising historical and political contexts, the popular discourse today attributes terrorism to cultural reasons – what Mamdani terms 'Culture Talk' – for example, explaining the practice of "terrorism" as "Islamic." Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and that politics is thought to be a consequence of that essence. For some people who demonise Islam, Islamic culture seems to be monolithic and without history, politics or debates, so all Muslims are just plain bad. Others recognise that

there is diversity within Islam, and that there are "good" and "bad" Muslims who are seen as following different types of practices within Islam.

But the problem with Culture Talk is that culture is seen to be mummified and antiquated, and that the behavioural outcomes of those who follow that culture is predetermined. As Mamdani puts it, "could it be that a person who takes his or her religion literally is a potential terrorist? And that someone who thinks of a religious text as metaphorical or figurative is better suited to civic life and the tolerance it calls for? How, one may ask, does the literal reading of sacred texts translate into hijacking, murder and terrorism?" The answer to Mamdani's questions, of course, is really that we would not be able to understand terrorism by looking at culture alone – we must necessarily problematise the issue by turning to historical and political explanations.

Mamdani identifies Bernard Lewis, who has been an advisor to the US policy establishment, as the founding father of Culture Talk. In his book '*The Roots of Muslim Rage*' (1990), Lewis noted that "there is something in the religious culture of Islam which inspired, in even the humblest peasant, a dignity and a courtesy towards others that is never exceeded and rarely equalled in other civilisations. And yet, in moments of upheaval and disruption, ...this dignity and courtesy can give way to an explosive mixture of rage and hatred." In other words, Lewis considers Islamic civilisation as an *unchanging* doctrine in which Muslims are said to take refuge in times of crisis. From this viewpoint, the roots of Islamist political terror can be found in Islamic culture and civilisation. More importantly, Lewis provides intellectual support for the notion that there are "good" and "bad" Muslims, an idea that has become the driving force of US foreign policy post 9/11.

Lewis's version of Culture Talk is different from the one advocated by another prominent proponent, Samuel Huntington. In '*The Clash of Civilisations?*' (1993), Huntington proclaimed, "It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural... The clash of civilisations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future." Unlike Lewis, Huntington casts Islam in its entirety in the role of an enemy

civilisation. From this point of view, Muslims could only be bad. While the US foreign policy post 9/11 is not informed by this perspective, Mamdani argues that Huntington's version of Culture Talk is in line with the US foreign policy during the Cold War.

To understand Islamist terrorism, Mamdani repeatedly argues that there is a need to move away from cultural explanations and look instead to specific political and historical circumstances. Mamdani says that Islamist political violence developed from the confluence of events that took place both inside and outside the Muslim world. The key event which took place within the Muslim world was the development of the ideological basis for political violence, which emerged in the encounter between Islamists intellectuals and different Marxist-Leninist ideals that embraced armed struggle in the postwar period. Of particular significance were the ideas of Abul A'la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qtub which called for an armed *jihad* in radical Islamist thought. According to Mamdani, Mawdudi was the first to stress the imperative of *jihad* for contemporary Muslims, the first to claim that armed struggle was central to *jihad*, and the first to call for a universal *jihad*. For Mawdudi, reform could only be achieved through the seizure of state power and establishing an ideological Islamic state.

Qutb, in contrast, did not really see the state as the true agent of change in history, arguing instead for a more society-centred reform. Qutb's main concern was how to initiate the revival of Islam in the modern world. While he believed that Islam can liberate every human being from servitude, he also believed that the use of physical force to realise political, social and economic emancipation is justified. Nevertheless, for Mamdani, Qutb's version of political Islam was less authoritarian than Mawdudi's. Because Mawdudi was more preoccupied with the taking of power, Mamdani thinks that his ideas were closer to the intellectual basis of political terror.

But the development of an ideological basis for radical Islam did not necessarily lead to terrorism – what was needed was an organisational framework which would translate radicalism from the realm of ideas to action. According to Mamdani, the organisational support for these radical movements came from the US during the Cold War. In the Cold War era, the US saw political Islam as an ally in the struggle against the Soviet Union. Under

Reagan's leadership, the US followed the policy of "rollback," which basically meant defeating the Communists at all costs, even if it meant forming alliances with the most dubious leaders and organisations, and employing terror as a strategy. In other words, coexistence with or even containment of the "enemy" was not an option – the "enemy" must be completely destroyed. Afghanistan was considered the high point in the Cold War because US wanted to turn it into the Soviet's Vietnam: in other words, it was where the Soviets would bleed white.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the CIA worked with Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to provide maximum firepower to the mujahideen and to recruit the most radically anti-Communist Islamists to counter Soviet forces. Islamic recruits came to the ISI-run training camps from all over the world where they were ideologically charged with the responsibility of a holy war and trained in guerilla tactics. Supported by some clerics, participation in the *jihad* became not just a political obligation but a religious duty. The Afghan *jihad*, therefore, nurtured right-wing Islamism – small and scattered before the war – by giving it organisation, numbers, skills and a coherent objective.

The terror which was bred during the Cold War continued to grow even after the defeat of the Soviets. In Pakistan, the militant training camps did not close but in fact recruited new waves of militants who continued to learn how to produce and spread terror. Mamdani argues that the US also continued to use terror even after the end of the Cold War. One terror tactic was the continued bombing of Iraq after the Gulf War, and the imposition of trade sanctions which deprived an already-impoverished nation of badly-needed food supplies. Mamdani considers this as terror because it embraced the idea of collective punishment – that is, seeking vengeance without distinguishing state and people. Mamdani's point is that such imperialist acts fuel collective grievances which provide the popular support for terrorist acts, thus turning Islamist militant groups, formerly allies with the US during the Cold War, against the US. With the legacy of US's foreign policy during the Cold War coming back to haunt it, Mamdani concludes that there is no wall that separates "our" terrorism from "their" terrorism because each tends to feed the other.

In '*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*', Mamdani does a competent job in interrogating popular representations of Islam, as evidenced from his discussion on the differences between "terrorism", "fundamentalism" and "political Islam." Because this book arose from talks he gave at New York City's Riverside Church (known for its efforts in promoting inter-religious dialogue), its presentation is breezy and informal, thus making it accessible for the general reader. There are, however, frustrating digressions which, while embellishing the critique of American imperialism, tend to pull the arguments he makes in different directions.

Nevertheless, Mamdani's efforts are timely and much-needed, in light of the on-going battle against terrorism today. While Mamdani recognises the urgent need to eradicate terror, he urges us to firstly reflect on what is this "terror" we are talking about. His critique of Culture Talk reminds people who, for instance, rushed to purchase the Quran after the 9/11 attacks in order to understand the psychology and motivation of the terrorists, that there is really no "problem" with Islam which need to be "fixed." Terrorism arose from particular historical and political circumstances which the US played a very instrumental role in creating. How, then, can we break out of this cycle of terror? Mamdani believes that terror must be fought politically and not just militarily. To deny the support for terrorist groups requires addressing grievances that give terrorists so many opportunities to recruit followers. For Mamdani, the US must play an active role in the efforts of reconciliation, which must begin with taking responsibility of the consequences which arose from its Cold War foreign policies. Drawing on the themes from his earlier works, Mamdani insists that the US must learn to distinguish between justice and vengeance, and that the response to injury need not be further violence. The bottomline, for Mamdani, is that the US can longer be an imperial power which does not tolerate the co-existence of others.

Because Mamdani's ideas are addressed largely to an American audience, it is important for Singaporean Muslim readers to reflect further on how his thoughts are relevant and applicable in our context. While we should be aware of Mamdani's critique of American imperialism, we should not be celebratory or triumphalist, or be content with "blaming" the US for creating the monster which is haunting it now. Instead, we should keep in mind Mamdani's reminder that Islamists are not just victims of historical and

political circumstances, but that they also make conscious choices in embracing political violence. Our task is to create conditions in which the choices that people make are for peace, not terror. Taking inspiration from Mamdani, we should also stop engaging in Culture Talk, whether in being apologetic or defensive when talking about Islamist political violence. It is also important to engage in debate among ourselves, to contest in the marketplace of ideas – underscored with a real commitment for peace and co-existence.

The past century has perhaps been the most violent in human history, but while the violence is staggering, it is not shocking to us. We cannot continue to be desensitised to violence, because violence needs to firstly become completely abhorrent and reprehensible to us in order to stop further cycles of it. As stressed by Mamdani, only a global movement for peace – in which everyone must play a part – can save humanity.

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