

Class War—Not Holy War!

Islam, Empire & Revolution

In April 1991 Sudan's fundamentalist regime hosted an international Islamist conference in Khartoum. Chaired by Hassan al-Turabi, Sudan's clerical ruler, delegates from 55 nations, representing millions of supporters, approved a six-point manifesto calling for pan-Islamic unity and the adoption of the *sharia* (Islamic law) as the basis of government in every Muslim country. The Afghan *mujahedin* (then on the brink of overthrowing the left-nationalist People's Democratic Party regime) were represented by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who first gained notoriety in the 1970s for throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women at Kabul University. Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), represented by Abassi Madani, had just bested the ruling party in municipal elections. Throughout the Muslim world, Islamists were making inroads among students, young intellectuals and discontented plebeian masses.

Since 1991, the Islamists have suffered some setbacks. In Algeria the "moderate" elements in the FIS are seeking an accommodation with the military rulers who have spent the past four years trying to crush them, while in Afghanistan, rival Islamic factions battle each other for supremacy, as the country slides into chaos. Sixteen years after taking power, Iran's Islamic Republic inspires more cynicism than fervor. Yet Muslim fundamentalism retains a mass following throughout much of the Middle East, and today the specter of militant Islam is acknowledged by the world powers as itself a world power.

Yet Islamic fundamentalism is far from being a unified world movement. Some groups seek accommodation with regimes willing to assume Islamic trappings; others are more intransigent toward the "internal infidel." Different groups employ various combinations of parliamentary, terrorist and mass insurrectionary tactics. Despite occasional ecumenical declarations, the enduring sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shiites remains. The most powerful Islamist state, Iran, is Shiite, and therefore viewed as somewhat heretical by the 85 percent of Muslims who are Sunni. Many Sunni Islamists, including Turabi, who is now a proponent of ecumenism, supported Iraq in its war with Iran in the 1980s.

Orthodox Muslims believe that the Quran is the word of God, dictated to the Prophet Muhammad, which can only be interpreted in conjunction with the *hadiths* (the sayings and actions of the Prophet and whichever other early Muslim leaders the particular sect venerates). Liberal Muslims, employing modernist interpretations, argue that Islamic doctrine is compatible with democracy, socialism and women's rights. Conservative fundamentalists are hostile to Islamic "modernism," but, unlike the radicals, they generally preach obedience to political authority. In Sunni countries, the *ulama* (religious scholars) are paid employees of the state, and can therefore be relied upon to interpret Islam's political message to suit the rulers of the day.

Tenets of Radical Islamism

Radical Islamists reject both liberal modernism and conservative quietism. The radicals view most of the states in the Middle East as pseudo-Islamic. They define the enemy

as creeping secularization and consumerism, which they associate with both the growth of the market and class struggle. In their view, pro-Western, free-market regimes are as guilty of promoting these trends as the Ba'athist "socialist" regimes in Syria and Iraq or the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria. The Islamists preach an internal *jihad* to establish truly Islamic regimes as a prerequisite for a successful external *jihad*.

While the modernists argue that Islam is inherently democratic because of its institution of *shura* (consultation), the radicals assert that *shura* only involves consultation with religious scholars for the proper interpretation of the *sharia*. In *Islamic Government* Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wrote:

"The Islamic government is not despotic but constitutional. However, it is not constitutional in the well-known sense of the word, which is represented in the parliamentary system or in the people's councils....The difference between the Islamic government and the constitutional governments, both monarchic and republican, lies in the fact that the people's representatives or the king's representatives are the ones who codify and legislate, whereas the power of legislation is confined to God, may He be praised, and nobody else has the right to legislate...."

Islamist militants combine denunciations of Western imperialism and the conspicuous consumption of the rich with reverence for private property and "Islamic economics." They are uniformly hostile to all forms of socialist and pro-working class ideology. Khomeini crushed the Iranian left soon after they aided his ascension to power and Turabi's regime decimated the Sudanese Communist Party, once one of Africa's largest. Sayyid Qutb, the preeminent ideologue of Sunni fundamentalism, often denounced "plutocracy" and western capitalism, but was opposed to the very idea of social equality:

"Muhammad could have certainly hoisted a social banner, launched a war upon the privileged and the high-born. He could have set Islam up as a movement aspiring to social change and redistribution of assets of the rich unto the poor.... Yet Allah, in his eternal wisdom, did not instruct the Prophet to take this course.... He made him launch only one rallying cry: 'There is no God but Allah!'"
—quoted in Emanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics*

Radical Islamists are also distinguished by their virulent commitment to the subordination of women. Qutb referred to the idea of women's liberation as a "sewer." The tiniest social space for women's freedom from male authority is denounced as *jahiliyya* (barbarism). From Algeria to Bangladesh, Islamists have attacked women who fail to abide by the reactionary social code of the mullahs.

Modernist interpretations of Islam downplay texts like the 34th verse of the Fourth Surah in the Quran:

"Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart,

and scourge [other translations say 'beat'] them."
 —*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, trans. by
 Muhammad Pickthall

Unlike the modernists, Islamic radicals unabashedly emphasize the incompatibility of Islam and equality for women. One of the first laws enacted by the Iranian parliament, after Shah Reza Pahlavi was deposed, was the Islamic Dress Law, which imposes a penalty of one year in prison for any woman not wearing the *hijab* (a headdress traditionally worn by unmarried Muslim women). Executions for adultery and homosexuality are common under the *sharia*.

Radical Islamists are also intensely anti-Semitic and generally intolerant of other religions. The Iranian regime initiated campaigns to wipe out the tiny Bahai and Zoroastrian minorities. The Egyptian fundamentalists have organized riots against the Christian Copts, whom they term the "crusaders." When Turabi's Sudanese regime took power through a military coup in 1989, one of its first acts was to declare a *jihad* against the black population in the south who are mainly Christians or animists. According to *Middle East Report* (November-December 1992):

"Many interpret this [declaration of *jihad*] to mean that land, cattle and women in conquered areas can be claimed by the conquerors. One influential woman leader in the Islamist movement suggested that a solution to the 'southern problem' was for Muslim men to take non-Muslim Dinka women as second wives or concubines, assuming their children would be raised as Muslims."

Social Roots of Radical Islamism

The phenomenon of radical Islamism has perplexed many Western analysts. To the Islamists themselves it is all quite clear: their movement is simply a reaction by pious believers to contemporary iniquity. Their successes can be attributed to divine intervention and their failures to satanic interference. For liberals and modernizing nationalists, the rise of Islamism is more troubling. It is a movement characterized by worship of irrational authority and unremitting hostility to the Twentieth Century that appears to increase its following every year, not only among the backward and uneducated masses and traditional exploiters, but also among the scientifically trained intelligentsia—precisely the social group that the modernizers look to. Western Orientalists talk about the region's inherent irrationality and mumble sagely about the impossibility of eradicating a thousand-year tradition. But this explains nothing.

The petty bourgeoisie in the Arab world, both traditionalist and modernist, has problems which drive it to seek irrational solutions. Squeezed by foreign capital, sucked dry by parasitical and corrupt neo-colonial state bureaucracies, and profoundly disturbed by the prospect of industrial conflict, the petty bourgeoisie is highly susceptible to the reactionary nostalgia proffered by Islamic fundamentalists. The Islamists denounce all the bugbears of the petty bourgeoisie—foreign competition, "cultural imperialism," working-class upheaval and statism. Their opposition to class struggle, their call on the rich to be charitable and the poor to be patient, expresses the social standpoint of the middle layers.

In many cases the militant Islamists have received substantial financial support from traditional elites, particularly those threatened by the growth of the secular state and/or foreign capital. The radicals' interpretation of the *sharia* usually is flexible enough to allow Islamists to appeal to more worldly motives when necessary. The Afghan *mu-*

jahedin ignored the Quranic prohibitions on usury in their *jihad* to protect the prerogatives of the moneylenders and the landlords.

Islamic movements have often been encouraged by those in power as a bulwark against the left. Even where they are frowned upon, the state authorities find it much harder to crack down on religious dissidents than on secular radicals. The familiarity of Islamic themes and ritual have made it easier for the fundamentalists to grow among sections of the population traditionally resistant to new ideas. In societies without social welfare systems, the newly urbanized poor are often dependent on charity organized through the mosques for their very survival. This gives the Islamists the ability to mobilize large numbers of lumpenized or semi-proletarian elements in the cities.

Militant Islamic fundamentalism is a relatively recent phenomenon. When Saudi Arabia's King Faisal set up the World Muslim League in 1962 to oppose Marxism and radical Arab nationalism, it had little appeal. Instead of embracing obscurantism, young people joined the socialist and nationalist left in huge numbers. In the 1960s the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic organization of the day, vacillated between supporting and opposing Gamal Abdel Nasser, the main apostle of the "Arab Revolution." Qutb, Egypt's preeminent radical fundamentalist, was at that point seen as a member of a lunatic fringe. This all began to change with the defeat of Egypt and its allies in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967, when Nasser was humiliated at the hands of the Zionist state. Suddenly radical Islamist groups that had previously been no more than tiny minorities began to gain the ear of the masses.

Arab nationalism once inspired the middle classes with its promises of independence, non-alignment and democracy. But yesterday's "anti-imperialist" regimes are today's obsequious servants of the IMF and Western investment bankers. The "Arab socialist" republics are reviled as overgrown and corrupt police states. The Stalinist parties, which once played leadership roles in important sections of the workers' movement in the region, are deeply discredited by decades of opportunist adaptation to a succession of "progressive" bourgeois figures (both secular and religious). The collapse of "actually existing socialism" in the former Soviet bloc is seen by the popular masses, and much of the left, as proof that the socialist project is not a viable alternative.

The Muslim extremists have benefited from the disintegration of their secular competitors. Yet there is tremendous potential for the growth of a revolutionary current within the proletariat. A combative workers' movement would be a pole of attraction for both the sub-proletarian urban masses and the discontented petty bourgeoisie. Without this it is not surprising that the intermediate layers embrace irrational solutions to the dislocations and depredations of the imperialist world order.

Iran's Islamic Revolution: Suicide of the Left

Since the overthrow of the shah, many Western experts have asserted that Shiism is inherently more political than Sunna. But in the 1950s the Iranian mullahs were far from militant. Before his death in 1961, Ayatollah Borujerdi, Khomeini's mentor and Iran's leading cleric, preached passive acceptance of worldly authority. The Shiite *ulama* had cautiously supported the left-nationalist Mossadegh government, which was overthrown by a CIA-engineered royalist coup in 1953. After the restoration of the shah, even the

bolder clerics, like Khomeini, asked for no more than a return to the 1906 constitution, which accorded the *ulama* an advisory function within a constitutional monarchy.

To consolidate his grip, the shah enlisted the help of the CIA and Israeli intelligence in establishing the SAVAK, Iran's powerful political police. By the early 1960s the regime initiated a modernization drive (the so-called "White Revolution") which included a limited land reform, profit sharing for industrial workers, female suffrage and mass co-education. The modernization program was intended to broaden popular support for the regime by undercutting its secular opponents on the left. In doing so the government antagonized the large landowners, the traditional bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie of the bazaar and the *ulama*.

Khomeini, who was beginning to emerge as the shah's leading opponent, denounced the regime's "revolution" and advocated a full-fledged theocracy, under the rule of a "learned jurist." He denounced the regime's venality, corruption, violations of Islamic morality and its connections to the Americans and Israelis. When Khomeini was arrested, on 5 June 1963, a wave of mass protests swept Iran, which were ruthlessly suppressed by the SAVAK and the army. An estimated 10,000 demonstrators were killed.

Khomeini was exiled in 1964. During the next fifteen years, he and the radical *ulama* hegemonized popular opposition to the shah. This was a remarkable development given the historic strength of leftist ideas and organizations within the powerful Iranian working class. It was facilitated by the repeated attempts of the Iranian Stalinist Tudeh Party to maneuver with the regime, while Khomeini intransigently called for its overthrow. In his book *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Dilip Hiro describes how the Imam established himself as the authoritative leader of the movement against the shah:

"[Khomeini] kept the alliance together during a highly turbulent period by championing the cause of each of the groups in the anti-Shah coalition, and maintaining a studied silence on such controversial issues as democracy, agrarian reform and the status of women. He aroused hopes of deliverance and improvement in different strata of society. The traditional middle class saw in Khomeini an upholder of private property, a partisan of the bazaar, and a believer in Islamic values. The modern middle class regarded Khomeini as a radical nationalist wedded to the programme adopted earlier by Mussadiq: ending royal dictatorship and foreign influences in Iran. The urban working class backed Khomeini because of his repeated commitment to social justice which, it felt, could be achieved only by transferring power and wealth from the affluent to the needy. Finally, the rural poor saw the Ayatollah as their saviour: the one to provide them with arable land, irrigation facilities, roads, schools and electricity."

Khomeini was not the only one to keep a tactful silence on topics like democracy, agrarian reform and women's rights (not to mention socialism and workers' rule)—the Iranian left also submerged these issues in favor of solidarizing with the religious opposition's denunciations of the shah and his U.S. backers. Yet it was the shah's land redistribution and introduction of female suffrage that had propelled Khomeini into intransigent opposition in the first place.

This grotesque opportunism had tragic consequences for the Iranian workers' movement. In September 1978, after the regime imposed martial law, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marched in Tehran, chanting

"Down with the Shah!" and demanding an Islamic republic. The government responded as it had in 1963, with bullets, and hundreds were slain. But this time, instead of quelling the protests, the massacre enraged millions of previously inactive citizens who suddenly poured into the streets.

The economically strategic oil workers (among whom the pro-Moscow Stalinists in the Tudeh Party had considerable influence) went on strike and were soon joined by workers in other industries. After a few months of continuing labor unrest and mass demonstrations, the Peacock Throne toppled. In the decisive confrontation with the Imperial Guard in February 1979, the New Leftist/Stalinist *Fedayin* and left-Muslim *Mujahedin* guerrillas provided the military leadership.

Yet the Iranian left had marginalized itself through its wilful political subordination to Khomeini, the supposed representative of the "progressive, anti-imperialist" petty bourgeoisie. The oil workers, leftist students, women, national and religious minorities who joined the demonstrations calling for "Down with the shah," did not want to replace the hated monarchy with a theocracy. Yet none of the left groups were prepared to "isolate" themselves from the mass movement through directly criticizing the mullahs. A genuinely revolutionary organization would have sought to drive forward the workers' struggles against the regime, while, at the same time, politically counterposing the perspective of a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government to the Khomeinites' call for an Islamic republic.

The Iranian left saw Khomeini as the embodiment of a "first stage" in a supposedly inexorable revolutionary process, and closed their eyes to the fundamentally reactionary character of his Islamic Revolution. The mullahs had no equivalent illusions. They immediately organized "Revolutionary Guards," and began to attack leftists, unveiled women, homosexuals, unionists and other "enemies of Islam." In March 1979, a mass demonstration of women protesting the imposition of the Islamic code was attacked by government-sponsored mobs and then fired upon by "revolutionary" troops. As Khomeini's regime consolidated, the badly disoriented leftist organizations were isolated and crushed one by one. Some eventually attempted to resist, while others continued to proclaim their fealty to their hangman all the way to the gallows.

One would expect that the attitude of professed Marxists toward religious theocrats (whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic or whatever) would be one of total and irreconcilable hostility. Yet various Western leftists, not themselves believers, have purported to discern a progressive or partially progressive character in Islamist movements. This is a product of an invidious Third Worldism, which at bottom boils down to simple liberalism. Many socialists, who are alert to the dangers of Christian fundamentalism in the U.S., seek to prettify radical Islamic movements as egalitarian and anti-imperialist. When the Iranian left made the fatal mistake of bowing to Khomeini, it was mimicked by every major international socialist current, both Stalinist and ostensibly Trotskyist, with the single exception of the then-revolutionary international Spartacist tendency (iSt), which alone refused to hail the triumph of Islamic reaction over the shah.

Afghanistan: State Department Jihad

While Iran's Islamists were loudly proclaiming their enmity for American imperialism, their Afghan brethren were aligning with the "Great Satan" in a U.S.-sponsored *jihad* against that country's pro-Soviet secular regime. In

April 1978 the People's Democratic Party (PDPA) took power in a defensive coup, promising radical reform and modernization. It passed laws redistributing land to those who tilled it and cancelling old debts, an extremely important reform in a country where debt bondage and usury were the preeminent forms of exploitation. The exploiters' resistance to these measures quickly took on an Islamic coloration. As Hiro explains:

"Decree 6 abolished all pre-1973 mortgages and debts, and drastically reduced the excessive interest (often 100 per cent a year) on later loans....More often than not village mullahs, having blood ties with landlord-money-lenders, ruled that cancellation of debts amounted to stealing, and was therefore unIslamic. (On the other hand the pro-regime minority among clerics cited the Quranic verse against *riba*, usury.) Many rural mullahs began preaching against the government in an environment where armed resistance against the regime took the form of murdering Marxist teachers and civil servants."

The mullahs were equally appalled by Decree 7, which granted women equal legal rights, abolished child marriage and reduced the bride price to a nominal amount. While the PDPA maintained state payments to mullahs who refrained from denouncing it, the clergy provided much of the leadership for the U.S.-funded and equipped counterrevolutionary revolt. The opposition included traditionalist fundamentalists aligned with the Pakistani and Saudi governments, but the largest single group was Hekmatyar's *Hizb-e Islami*, which sought to create an Islamic republic like the one in Iran.

The Soviet intervention in 1979 posed the possibility of major social progress in Afghanistan through extension of Soviet social relations. Yet that possibility was never realized. From the outset, the Kremlin pressured its Kabul client into making concessions to the traditionalist reactionaries. The PDPA built mosques, propagated Islam on state television and watered down its reforms. When Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew Soviet troops in 1989, the Afghan regime adopted Islam as the state religion. None of this appeased the Islamic reactionaries or their imperialist backers.

Nonetheless, the Afghan Stalinists survived their Soviet patrons and were only finally overthrown in April 1992. They lasted as long as they did in the face of overwhelming odds largely because of the determination of much of the urban population, including most of the working class, to resist Islamic rule and avoid the inevitable bloodbath after the *mujahedin* took power. Even before the PDPA was overthrown and its social reforms demolished, the Afghan "freedom fighters" fell out among themselves. The Western media, which spent a decade lionizing these reactionaries and their resistance to "Soviet imperialism," have long since lost interest in Afghanistan, which continues to be torn apart by squalid factional feuding among the various Islamic militias.

Algeria: IMF Austerity & Religious Reaction

For the past four years Algeria has been gripped by a brutal conflict between the bonapartist military regime, backed by French imperialism, and a powerful Islamist movement. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in a conflict whose origins can be traced back to the early 1980s, when slumping oil prices saddled Algeria with an enormous debt. The National Liberation Front (FLN) government, headed by President Chadli Benjedid, responded with austerity, privatization and destruction of Algeria's

elaborate system of state subsidies for consumer necessities. To counteract his regime's resulting unpopularity, Benjedid turned to "Islamization." In 1984 the FLN promulgated a Family Law incorporating the *sharia* into Algerian civil law, legalizing polygamy and giving men legal authority over their wives and unmarried daughters. These changes were vigorously opposed by women's organizations and leftists. The FLN countered by turning to the *ulama* and encouraging them to organize disaffected youth against the opponents of god's law. Soon gangs of young fundamentalist thugs were roaming around, breaking up meetings of leftists and feminists, and terrorizing Algeria's French and Berber-speaking minorities, as the police looked the other way.

Over time the regime's growing economic dependence on France and the International Monetary Fund led much of the population to regard it as a stooge for foreign imperialism. In October 1988 hundreds of thousands of youths rioted, demanding the democracy and egalitarianism which were part of the FLN's "socialist" rhetoric. The regime responded with a combination of sticks and carrots. In 1989, a new, pseudo-democratic constitution was approved by referendum. Political parties were legalized. This opened up possibilities for the left, but it also permitted the Islamists to coalesce under the banner of the ultra-reactionary Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which emerged as the strongest opposition group.

From its origins, the FIS, which regards both democracy and socialism as "Jewish-Masonic plots," has been deeply hostile to the labor movement. In 1991, when the UGTA labor federation (based among oil and chemical workers, dockers and other skilled workers) called a general strike demanding a price freeze, FIS-organized gangs attacked the unionists.

In late 1991 the FIS appeared to be on the verge of winning the first multi-party parliamentary election ever held in post-colonial Algeria. To prevent this, the military, which had for decades been the real power in the country, launched a preemptive coup in January 1992. The generals forced Algeria's long-time president and FLN-head Benjedid to resign, suspended the constitution and declared a state of emergency. Thousands of FIS sympathizers were placed in desert detention camps. The death penalty was reintroduced and torture was used to extract confessions (*Amnesty International Annual Report 1993*). In addition thousands of fundamentalists were killed in extra-judicial executions.

After the coup, the FIS split, with the "moderates" looking for some imperialist-sponsored deal which would allow them to share power and impose the *sharia* on the population. The more intransigent Islamists coalesced in the rival Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) and Armed Islamic Groups (GIA), which launched large-scale terror campaigns against secular intellectuals, feminists, leftists, Berbers, Western tourists, and each other, in addition to the state authorities.

The remnants of the deposed FLN attempted to act as a mediator for a government of "national reconciliation" which was to include the FIS. This approach was favored by U.S. imperialism, while France stuck by the military regime, as a reward for its loyal service in protecting French investments. The military was also supported by those sectors of the population which had the most to fear from an Islamist takeover. In the early days of the conflict, UGTA-initiated demonstrations supporting the generals against Islamist terrorism drew hundreds of thousands of

protesters.

It has long been clear that the military, which made various overtures to the Islamists on the basis of a shared anti-communism, could at any time strike some kind of deal with the FIS “moderates” and turn its guns on the workers’ movement. In the aftermath of the November 1995 elections, in which three-quarters of eligible voters reportedly participated (despite threats by the Islamist terrorists and a boycott by the bourgeois “Berber Rights” Front of Socialist Forces, the FLN and the FIS), representatives of the FIS have agreed to sit down and negotiate a “global solution” with the military.

A precondition for successful proletarian-centered struggle in Algeria is establishing the complete independence of the labor movement from the bourgeois state and bourgeois parties. This is a very real question in a country where, for decades, the union leadership functioned as a partner of the FLN regime. The organized workers’ movement can begin to break the hold of the Islamists on sections of the urban plebeian masses through using the leverage of the existing unions to aid the struggles of the poor, the unemployed, the unskilled and semi-skilled urban workers and the rural semi-proletariat.

A revolutionary program for Algeria must include democratic demands for the separation of mosque and state and for the defense of women, Berbers, homosexuals, religious minorities and all other victims and potential victims of the Islamic reactionaries. The response to terrorist attacks by the fundamentalists on the Algerian left and workers’ movement must be to organize effective united-front defense, independent of the repressive state. In contrast to FIS leader Madani’s empty denunciation of “Western infidels,” a revolutionary party would advocate the cancellation of the imperialist debt and link the expropriation of foreign capital to the struggle to overturn the rule of the Algerian bourgeoisie.

Anti-Muslim Hysteria and Imperialist Hypocrisy

Ever since Khomeini’s unanticipated triumph over the shah destroyed one of American imperialism’s key strategic assets, the Western media have been busy churning out anti-Muslim propaganda. With the collapse of the USSR, Arab terrorists have replaced Russians as Hollywood’s favorite bad guys. Pro-imperialist liberals have used incidents such as the Iranian mullahs’ threat to assassinate Salman Rushdie to contrast Islamic barbarism with the “civilized” West. The promotion of anti-Arab racism is particularly useful as a justification for contemporary crusades to “rescue” the modern equivalent of the Holy Sepulchre: the oil fields of the Middle East.

Concerns about Islamic fundamentalism also provide an acceptable cover for U.S. State Department intellectuals to express their fascination with the possibility of future race wars. In the Summer 1993 issue of the influential American publication, *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel Huntington conjured up the specter of a “Confucian-Islamic” alliance between a Japanese/Chinese/East Asia bloc and a resurgent Islamic fundamentalist Middle East, directed against Western Christian hegemony. While the existence of such a pact is completely hallucinatory, Huntington’s piece (entitled “The Clash of Civilizations”) is symptomatic of the American bourgeoisie’s anxiety about one day being displaced from its current position atop the imperialist world order.

The hysterical opposition to Islam has translated into a

wave of chauvinist attacks on Muslims living in Western countries. One example was the recent decision of the French government to ban the wearing of the *hijab* in public schools. Britain’s National Union of Students has come out in support of banning Islamic organizations on campuses. In the immediate aftermath of the criminal bombing of a federal government building in Oklahoma (apparently by Christian rightists), the U.S. media reflexively blamed Muslim extremists. This led to an outbreak of ugly racist attacks across the country. The labor movement in the imperialist countries must intransigently defend the democratic rights and religious freedom of Muslims, and oppose each and every instance of chauvinist behavior.

The hue and cry about Islamic religious extremism is particularly hypocritical coming from the U.S. rulers. Every recent American president, Democrat or Republican, has played to the backwardness of the American masses with professions of his own deeply-held Christian faith. At one point during his first term in the White House, Ronald Reagan remarked that he believed that the apocalypse prophesied in the Book of Revelations could be drawing very near. Unlike the most fanatic Islamic extremist, Reagan possessed the means to turn apocalyptic religious delusions into reality. Prior to launching the 1991 Gulf War, George Bush wheeled out Billy Graham, the all-purpose evangelical charlatan, to bless the U.S. military as it prepared the massacre of tens of thousands of defenseless Iraqis.

While Muslim fundamentalism may be widely denounced in the popular media, in the last analysis there is no necessary contradiction between imperialist interests and the Islamic theocrats. The U.S. has long maintained a cozy relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, where the *sharia* is rigidly enforced. The State Department has also kept in touch with “moderate” Islamists, including elements in the Algerian FIS, and among the Iranian mullahs.

International investors are indifferent to the Islamists’ persecution of women and minorities, but they are impressed by their anti-communism and commitment to private property and social order. The more sophisticated capitalist commentators on the Middle East have no trouble distinguishing between the rhetoric and the substance of the Islamic “revolutionaries”:

“Too many Muslim countries are non-democracies, and too many of these non-democracies have governments that combine being inefficient and unpopular with not really having a grip on the places they supposedly rule. The status quo is not going to last. Awkwardly, the status quo is convenient for the West....

“...the source most likely to displace many existing governments—the Islamic revival—could in the long run prove a stabler partner for the West. In the short run, though, the collapse of the status quo is going to produce some angry quarrels.

“When these endanger genuine Western interests—a free market in oil, safe traffic in the air and on the sea, the security of decent allies [i.e., Israel]—the West must be ready to defend those interests. The more visibly determined it is to defend them, the less likely that it will actually have to pull a trigger. But the West should be clear in its mind that, properly handled, these quarrels are merely the usual difficulties of a time of transition; and that the aim, when the transition is complete, should be an easier relationship with a modernised Islam.”

—*Economist*, 6 August 1994

The imperialist powers had similar conflicts with an

earlier generation of neo-colonial bourgeois nationalist regimes. While leftists must be prepared to bloc militarily with any indigenous elements in neo-colonial countries against imperialist intervention, the Islamists' rhetorical anti-imperialism should not be allowed to obscure their fundamentally reactionary character.

British SWP: 'With the Islamists, Sometimes...'

In the November 1994 issue of *Socialist Review*, Chris Harman, a senior figure in Tony Cliff's British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), correctly criticized the French Lutte Ouvriere organization for refusing to defend Muslim schoolgirls expelled for wearing the *hijab*. Yet Harman went beyond simply opposing such manifestations of religious (and racial) persecution by the French state, to suggest that the Islamists' message is "two-sided." He wrote that Islam is attractive to:

"many women for whom modern city life seems to offer little more than poverty and sexual harassment. They believe the Islamic code can somehow protect them from the commodification of their bodies, even if it also enforces a certain style of dress and enjoins them to respect the authority of their fathers and husbands. It certainly seems better than the society of the sex shop and the world bank, of rich women in western dresses and expensive make-up driving air conditioned cars while poor women watch their children die of hunger or diarrhoea."

Unlike Islamic fanatics, Marxists are not opposed to sex shops, Western dresses, make-up or air conditioning. We know that the children of the poor die because of the imperatives of an irrational and exploitative economic world order. Harman's suggestion that wearing the veil "seems better than the society of the sex shop" implies that Muslim women make a free and deliberate choice to exchange personal freedom for protection from the roving eyes of strange and lustful men. In fact the Islamic dress code is generally enforced through terrorizing those who dare defy it.

In "The Prophet and the Proletariat," a major article in *International Socialism* (IS—Autumn 1994), the SWP's theoretical journal, Harman quotes Ali Belhadj, leader of the extreme wing of the FIS, as saying:

"Can you conceive of any violence greater than that of this woman who burns the scarf in a public place, in the eyes of everyone, saying the Family Code penalises women and finding support from the effeminated, the half-men and the transsexuals..."

"It is not violence to demand that woman stays at home, in an atmosphere of chastity, reserve and humility and that she only goes out in cases of necessity defined by the legislator...to demand the segregation of sexes among school students and the absence of that stinking mixing that causes sexual violence..."

Harman places very little emphasis on the urgent necessity to combat the lethal danger posed by the FIS and its offshoots to unveiled women, "half men," Berbers and Francophones. Toward the end of his 55-page article, he comments that, "as well as defending Islamists against the state we will also be involved in defending women, gays, Berbers or Copts against some Islamists." But this reference to opposition to the excesses by "some" Islamists (presented in the context of defense of the Islamists) contrasts with the tilt of the rest of the article, in which the would-be theocrats, who inspire and organize the attacks against the "infidels," are depicted as "petty bourgeois utopians":

"Radical Islamism, with its project of reconstituting society on the model established by Mohammed in 7th century Arabia, is, in fact, a 'utopia' emanating from an impoverished section of the new middle class....

"Socialists cannot regard petty bourgeois utopians as our prime enemies."

Who then does Harman consider to be the "prime enemy" of Iran's workers, leftists, Kurds, gays and women? From the safety of his English study he reassures his readers that: "Islamism cannot freeze economic and therefore social development any more than any other ideology can." Cold comfort for Algerian Berbers, Coptic Christians in Egypt, blacks in Sudan, as well as homosexuals and leftists throughout the region.

Cliffites & Iran's 'Revolutionary' Mullahs

Harman's detached, philosophical attitude toward the Islamic fundamentalists is not a matter of an individual blindspot. In general the SWP leadership, motivated by a combination of Third Worldist pseudo-anti-imperialism and anti-Sovietism, has tended to view the Islamists favorably. Harman tut-tuts about how "the great bulk of the Iranian left" initially portrayed the "Islamist movements as 'progressive', 'anti-imperialist' movements of the oppressed," yet, at the time, the SWP itself was downplaying the danger of the Islamic reactionaries:

"The most prominent leaders of the opposition are the Muslim leaders. The press plays this up. For all his brutality, runs the argument, the Shah is preferable to the backward religious 'freaks'. This only highlights the ignorance of the press.

"Iran has never been a hot-bed of Muslim fanaticism. Unlike other Arab states, there are no extreme right wing organisations with religious links here. Quite the opposite. They are at the head of the mass opposition movement because there is no alternative. Both the left and the nationalists are too weak to challenge their leadership."

—*Socialist Worker*, 16 September 1978

The essential "weakness" of the Iranian left was *political*—it closed its eyes to the reality of the Khomeinites and went along with their "revolutionary" mass movement against the shah. In his *International Socialism* article Harman finds it necessary to devote an extensive footnote criticizing an earlier article, "Islamic Fundamentalism—Oppression and Revolution," that appeared in the Autumn 1988 issue of the same journal. Harman criticizes its author, Phil Marshall, for depicting the Islamists as those who simply "express the struggle against imperialism," for his failure "to see the petty bourgeoisie [sic] limitations of Islamist movements" and for mistakenly equating them with "the rising, anti-colonialist movements of the early 1920s."

But Marshall was only expressing the line of the SWP leadership. Harman is uncomfortably aware that his criticism of other leftists for adapting politically to the mullahs can also be applied to the SWP. In an article on the Iran/Iraq war, published at the same time as Marshall's (almost ten years after Khomeini came to power), Alex Callinicos, regarded as the group's most able theorist, explained the SWP's idea of a revolutionary strategy for the Iranian left:

"It would have meant revolutionaries demanding that the mullahs wage a *revolutionary* war against the US and its allies, that, as I wrote at the beginning of the war, they 'make Tehran the beacon of *genuine* revolution throughout the region—granting the right of self-determination

to the Kurds, Arabs and other national minorities, establishing organs of popular power, fighting for the liberation of women from the Islamic yoke'. (*Socialist Worker*, 4 October 1980)"

—*Socialist Worker Review*, September 1988, emphasis in original

Presumably the SWP would not demand that the mullahs act as "the beacon of *genuine* revolution" unless they considered them to be leading "'progressive,' 'anti-imperialist' movements of the oppressed."

In attempting to clean up the SWP's record, Harman downplays the centrality of the Ayatollah Khomeini in the events leading up to the overthrow of the shah. Yet the facts are well established. In *The Wrath of Allah*, published in 1983 by Pluto Press, Ramy Nima (an associate of Mike Kidron, a long-time Cliff supporter) recounted how the cycle of protests that ultimately toppled the shah began with a January 1978 article in the regime's semi-official press that:

"labelled the clergy as 'black reactionaries' and charged Khomeini with being a British spy receiving funds from England and with being really a foreigner ('this Indian Sayyed') who had written love poems of an erotic nature. 'This article was the spark that ignited a series of explosive events which shook the Pahlavi regime to its foundations. Theology students in Qom staged a massive demonstration. The bazaar closed down in protest....In the ensuing two days of fighting some 70 people were killed and over and 500 injured.

"The incident at Qom marks the point from which the religious opposition, under the leadership of the militant clergy and the mosque, moved towards an Islamic revolution and an inevitable collision with the forces of the state."

Harman acknowledges that Khomeini's name "had come to symbolise opposition to the monarchy," but minimizes the extent to which Islamist ideology characterized the protests:

"On his return to Teheran in January 1979 he [Khomeini] became the symbolic leader of the revolution.

"Yet at this stage he was far from controlling events, even though he had an acute sense of political tactics. The key events that brought the Shah down—the spread of strikes, the mutiny inside the armed forces—occurred completely independently of him."

Harman is attempting a bit of political sleight-of-hand here. Khomeini was the central figure (as well as the "symbolic leader") long before he stepped off the airplane in January 1979, but this does not mean that he personally controlled events in every barrack, school and factory. His political program, codified in the demand for an "Islamic Republic," was the axis of the upheavals; his clerics organized the mass protests and his slogan, "Allah Akbar" (god is great) predominated. One need only look at photos of the demonstrations with their pictures of the Imam, their veiled women, and the slogans, to understand that the Iranian Revolution that so excited the SWP was politically hegemonized by the mullahs.

The Cliffites explicitly compared the situation in Iran to "the two great revolutionary upsurges in Chile and Portugal in the early Seventies," (*Socialist Worker* [SW] 24 February 1979), portraying it as a situation in which a rising workers' movement confronted the capitalist state power. Khomeini was treated as a figure who had only a marginal connection to events—a sort of Father Gapon. The 3 February 1979 *Socialist Worker* wrote: "Khomeini arises out of a vacuum, left by the absence of any party to which workers

can give support and which can support them."

Picking up on this, Cliff's Canadian supporters published an article in the February 1979 issue of their paper entitled "The form—religion; The spirit—revolution." It commented:

"Khomeini has many reactionary views. He is an absolute anti-communist. But, for the time being Khomeini is a symbolic focus for a revolt....

"But to believe the people of Iran are fighting and dying in their hundreds and thousands only to let one reactionary leader be replaced by another is absurd."

With the benefit of hindsight Harman now considers that: "The victory of Khomeini's forces in Iran was not, then, inevitable and neither does it prove that Islamism is a uniquely reactionary force....It merely confirms that, in the absence of independent working class leadership, revolutionary upheaval can give way to more than one form of the restabilisation of bourgeois rule...."

—*International Socialism*, Autumn 1994

Khomeini's victory over the working class was only "inevitable" because his leftist opponents closed their eyes to the dangers posed by the Islamists. They passively acquiesced to his leadership and consoled themselves with the same kind of celebration of the Islamic Revolution that Cliff's followers were retailing abroad. In all this, the role of the socialist vanguard was entrusted to the unfolding of some inexorable historical process.

It is not enough to abstractly invoke the desirability of an "independent working class leadership" as Harman does. It was necessary to specify what programmatic positions such an "independent" formation should advance. The Iranian workers needed to be told the simple truth that life under the mullahs would be as bad as under the SAVAK, and that they should oppose the Khomeinites' attempts to establish an Islamic republic and counterpose the fight for a workers' republic.

Throughout the critical months, *Socialist Worker* was busy asking questions like "Iran: Can Soldiers Beat the Generals?" (10 February 1979) and advising that, "If they are to be won over they must be convinced that the revolution will bring an improvement in their life back home." The next week, after the mullahs triumphed, *Socialist Worker's* headline read "Iran: The glory" (17 February 1979). The same week the headline on the front page of *Workers Vanguard*, the main organ of the international Spartacist tendency (from which the International Bolshevik Tendency derives) had a different message: "Down with Khomeini! For Workers Revolution! Mullahs Win." For the SWP and the rest of the opportunists, this was absurd "sectarianism."

It is remarkable how closely the SWP's explanations for its political adaptation parallel those of the Iranian Stalinists, who distinguished themselves on the Iranian left as the most craven apologists for the mullahs' political revolution.

"The Tudeh Party of Iran considered the formation of a *united popular front* the main pre-condition for the victory of the revolution and it was with such a strategy and tactics that it actively participated in the February 1979 Revolution. The victory of the Revolution and the character it assumed proved the correctness of the Party's analysis. The 1979 Revolution was a national-democratic revolution with a popular, anti-monarchical, anti-dictatorial and anti-imperialist content. Despite the current regime's propaganda the Revolution did not have an Islamic content. The February Revolution had a class and social character. At the same time, it is also a fact that the revolutionary movement in the country had, for specific

reasons, a religious form.”

—“Assessment of the Policies of the Tudeh Party of Iran during the years 1979-83,” *Documents of the National Conference of the Tudeh Party of Iran* (1986), emphasis in original

Following Khomeini’s victory, the SWP joined the Tudeh and the rest of the Iranian left in backing Tehran in its squalid war with Sadaam Hussein’s Iraq. And, of course, Cliff & Co. also fulsomely supported the reactionary CIA-funded Afghan *mujahedin* in its war against the modernizing PDPA government and their Soviet backers. Harman’s slogan summarizing the Cliffites’ policy (“With the Islamists sometimes, with the state never”) represents a generalization of the earlier disastrous support to the Khomeinists against the shah.

Down With Islamic Reaction!

Harman sagely opines that leftists tend to make symmetrical errors on Islamism: they either regard it as reactionary or as progressive and anti-imperialist. Harman seeks the middle ground and suggests that the doctrines of political Islam are sufficiently contradictory that they can be given virtually any class content:

“[Islamists] grow on the soil of very large social groups that suffer under existing society, and whose feeling of revolt could be tapped for progressive purposes, providing a lead came from a rising level of workers’ struggle. And even short of such a rise in the struggle, many of the individuals attracted to radical versions of Islamism can be influenced by socialists—provided socialists combine complete political independence from all forms of Islamism with a willingness to seize opportunities to draw individual Islamists into genuinely radical forms of struggle alongside them.

“Radical Islamism is full of contradictions. The petty bourgeoisie is always pulled in two directions—towards radical rebellion against existing society and towards compromise with it. And so Islamism is always caught between rebelling in order to bring about a complete resurrection of the Islamic community, and compromising in order to impose Islamic ‘reforms’.”

Every variety of false consciousness is full of contradictions. But the Islamists’ “radical rebellion” is not aimed at the oppressive and exploitative social relations of the existing order; rather, they oppose the very limited freedoms the downtrodden have won for themselves. The radical fundamentalists are in no way preferable to their more moderate brethren; they merely use more extreme tactics in pursuit of essentially the same anti-working class goals.

The Islamist movement has been used as a battering ram to destroy proletarian institutions, break strikes and persecute the specially oppressed. Harman quotes Algeria’s FIS leader, Abassi Madani, explaining why he helped break a garbage workers’ strike in March 1991:

“There are strikes of trade unions that have become terrains for action by the corrupters, the enemies of Allah and the fatherland, communists and others, who are spreading everywhere because the cadre of the FLN have retreated.”

Yet Harman treats the FIS leadership’s strikebreaking as if it somehow contradicted its desire for state power:

“In reality, the more powerful the FIS became, the more it was caught between respectability and insurrectionism, telling the masses they could not strike in March 1991 and then calling on them to overthrow the state two months

later in May.”

The confusion is Harman’s, not Madani’s. The FIS’s insurrectionism, like that of other extreme Islamist groups, is directly connected to its hostility to the labor movement. The “masses” Madani was appealing to—desperate petty bourgeois and lumpen youth—did not include the workers, whose strikes he opposed; in fact, the FIS’s whole project was to mobilize the former to smash the latter.

Harman’s reasoning reflects the same “optimistic” objectivism that led the SWP leadership (and the rest of the impressionistic left) to support Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution in 1978. The basic idea is simple—any mobilization against the state, even with an avowedly reactionary leadership and intent, is to be welcomed because it will encourage mass self-activity, which must eventually take a socialist direction.

Harman does concede that:

“There is no automatic progression from seeing the limitations of Islamic reformism to moving to revolutionary politics. Rather the limitations of reformism lead either to the terrorism and guerrillaism of groups that try to act without a mass base, or in the direction of a reactionary attack on scapegoats for the problems of the system.”

However he also suggests that “Islamic reformists” who turn militant can play a positive role, and criticizes those leftists who, “fail to take into account the destabilising effect of the [Islamist] movements on capital’s interests right across the Middle East,” and concludes:

“Islamism...both mobilises popular bitterness and paralyzes it; both builds up people’s feelings that something must be done and directs those feelings into blind alleys; both destabilises the state and limits the real struggle against the state.”

What Harman does not (and cannot) explain is why socialists should welcome destabilization by reactionary, theocratic movements. In the January 1994 issue of *Socialist Review*, the SWP has no trouble labelling the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), notorious for organizing pogroms against India’s Muslim community, as “near fascist.” Yet he applies different criteria to the essentially similar Islamic fundamentalists.

Harman argues that the Islamists should not be considered as reactionaries *per se*:

“The aspiration to recreate a mythical past involves not leaving existing society intact, but recasting it. What is more, the recasting cannot aim to produce a carbon copy of 7th century Islam, since the Islamists do not reject every feature of existing society. By and large they accept modern industry, modern technology and much of the science on which it is based—indeed, they argue that Islam, as a more rational and less superstitious doctrine than Christianity, is more in tune with modern science. And so the ‘revivalists’ are, in fact, trying to bring about something which has never existed before, which fuses ancient traditions and the forms of modern social life.

“This means it is wrong simply to refer to all Islamists as ‘reactionary’ or to equate ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ as a whole with the sort of Christian fundamentalism which is the bastion of the right wing of the Republican Party in the US.”

Reactionary appeals for a return to traditional values inevitably invoke a golden age that never actually existed. Pat Robertson, and the rest of the Christian reactionaries in the Republican Party, may dream of turning back the clock 80 or 100 years, but they do not want to recreate the America

in which the radical Knights of Labor and the Wobblies commanded the allegiance of many working people. Like their Muslim counterparts, Christian fundamentalists “accept modern industry, modern technology and much of the science on which it is based,” and only reject those parts of science which conflict with holy scripture. They are downright enthusiastic about digital communications, satellite technology and new missile delivery systems.

There is of course an important distinction between the character of political reaction in a dependent capitalist country like Iran or Algeria, and an imperialist superpower. But Harman’s objection to “equating” the ideologies of Islamic and Christian fundamentalism would only make sense if he considers Islam somehow closer to truth than Christianity. Surely it is no more rational to believe that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets than that Jesus is the Lamb of God.

Swimming Against the Stream

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism is a response to a century of imperialist domination. It is, among other things, an attempt by a section of the people of the region—particularly the petty-bourgeois elements—to assert their identity against the economically and culturally dominant Western powers. But much of the left refuses to learn—even when the lesson is written in its own blood—that every response to oppression is not necessarily healthy or progressive. Obscurantism, radical particularism, the celebration of the most backward aspects of traditional cultures and a rejection of social progress, science and enlightenment as “Western decadence”—these are among the familiar reactionary byproducts of the imperialist age. And they are no less reactionary because they are embraced by multitudes of imperialism’s victims. Marxists must understand

the genesis of such mass pathologies without themselves being infected by them.

The SWP’s inability to draw the simple lesson from its opportunism over the Iranian Revolution—that Islamic fundamentalism is reactionary—is shared by the United Secretariat and most of the smaller groupings in the international “Trotskyist” left. All these groups swear by Trotsky’s opposition to the Stalinized Comintern’s support for the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) in the 1920s. Yet Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the KMT, purported to be heading a revolutionary struggle to dispossess the feudal landowners, win democratic rights for working people and liberate women from their oppression. In fact Chiang was so “left” that he signed on as an honorary member of the Communist International, and loudly praised the Bolshevik Revolution. In short, he appeared far to the left of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the leaders of the reactionary Islamic fundamentalists of today. Yet the Left Opposition, headed by Trotsky, warned that in supporting the KMT, the Chinese communists were putting their heads on the chopping block.

Unlike the KMT, contemporary Islamists make no pretense of leftism, or pushing forward the rights of women or the oppressed. They do not deign to conceal their reactionary views and aims. The social base of the Islamic revival, which so impresses the opportunist left, ultimately derives from the economic deformations inflicted on neo-colonial countries by imperialism. The only way to establish the economic foundations for the social liberation of the masses of the Muslim world is through the revolutionary victory of the working class, at the head of all the oppressed and exploited, committed to expropriating the imperialists and their local allies. Forging the kind of party capable of leading such a social revolution requires, as a precondition, intransigent opposition to religious reaction. ■

Marxism and Religion

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels began their political careers as radical democrats, calling for, among other things, the secularization of the state and freedom of conscience. Marx criticized the inadequacy of mere anticlericalism on the grounds that, even relegated to the private sphere, religion is still a reflection of social oppression—a veil (or “opiate”) that conceals the real workings of an irrational social order. The main task, Marx said, is not to criticize the religious illusion, but to abolish the “condition that requires illusions.”

Marxists are uncompromising opponents of all forms of religious mysticism, and advocates of the complete separation of church and state. At the same time they defend religious freedom and insist on equal rights for all. As Lenin put it:

“Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule. Discrimination among citizens on account of their religious convictions is wholly intolerable. Even the bare mention of a citizen’s religion in official documents should unquestionably be eliminated. No subsidies should be granted to the established church nor state allowances made to ecclesiastical and religious

societies....Complete separation of Church and State is what the socialist proletariat demands of the modern state and the modern church.”

—“Socialism and Religion,” 1905

Marxism is based on a scientific and materialist worldview. Those who preach doctrines of divine intervention in human affairs and promise an afterlife are generally among the promoters of resignation to oppression and exploitation in this one. The holy texts of Islam, Christianity and Judaism have all been used, at one time or another, to justify slavery, male supremacy, racism, homophobia and genocide.

Marxists see class struggle, rather than anti-religious education, as the principal vehicle for progress. Once social oppression has been eliminated in this life, belief in the next one will tend to wither away of itself. We call on workers of all religions (and of none) to join together in common struggle. While Marxists generally attempt to avoid gratuitously offending those workers who hold religious convictions of one sort or another, the battle against religious oppression, for a secular state, for women’s liberation and homosexual rights are key elements of the Marxist program of social liberation. This is why religious fanatics, like the powerful economic elites whose support they often enjoy, regard communists as their most intransigent enemies.