

# THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE

The Western left and Islamic radicals are finding common causes, writes

**Tanveer Ahmed**

**T**here were some very odd images during the recent conflict in Israel and Lebanon. Not of the actual war, despite Israeli shock from pictures of Hezbollah military equipment being as sophisticated as their own, or of the widespread devastation in southern Lebanon. I am referring to pictures of urban protests here in Australia.

The alliance between left-wing groups and Lebanese community bodies produced images of union leaders wearing the kaffiyeh, the headgear made famous by Yasser Arafat, of the Socialist Alliance marching adjacent to the Hezbollah flag and of environmental supporters trying to mouth an occasional 'Allahu Akbar'.

As simultaneously humorous and worrying as these developments are, it is indicative of a growing convergence between some Islamic groups and the wider left.

This is most obvious in the realm of foreign policy, where many non-Muslims are viewing Islamic radicalism as a kind of resistance force against the global hegemony of the West and therefore something to be supported.

Convergence is also apparent in the grey arena of what constitutes human fulfilment, with both groups arguing that the modern market economy hampers more fundamental human needs.

## Critiques of market society

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian scholar and Muslim Brotherhood member who was executed in 1966, is a major figure in radical Islamic thought. Qutb's pamphlet *Milestones*, a distillation of his thoughts, profoundly influenced two major leaders of the al-Qaeda movement—Ayman al-Zawahiri and the now deceased Abdul Musab al-Zarqawi, not to mention our very own Sheikh Hilaly, who has spoken of his admiration for Qutb during local sermons.

Qutb believed the modern world was inherently corrupt. He saw both Western capitalism and Marxism as unable to provide 'any healthy values for the guidance of mankind'. He did not see Islam vying with the West in terms of material or economic progress, but believed it could provide the torch for humanity's spiritual needs.

This overlaps with what Dr Clive Hamilton, the director of the Australia Institute, argues in much of his commentary, most recently in his *Quarterly Essay* titled 'What's Left?'. He believes that the modern, deregulated market economy has become

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so insidious that it is fundamentally detrimental to human fulfilment. He refers to this as an inability to build 'authentic lives', which has a pseudo-religious flavour about it. The authentic self, he argues, is what we could all find if advertising and the market did not hide it from us. This is similar to the critique of Islamic groups and social conservatives in general, who argue that spiritual needs are difficult to meet under the barrage of the market.

Qutb openly advocates the imposition of the state, in the form of God's law, to save our souls. This is something that many Muslims across the world would agree with, believing the imposition of Shariah law, the legal code based on the Koran, would be beneficial for all mankind. It includes

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many groups living within the West, such as Hizb-ul-Tahrir, who are openly working towards the uptake of Shariah law through education.

Hamilton does not openly advocate such a change from above, but implies that the system is sick and requires political transformation.

### Ideology of the underdog

Islam is fast becoming the ideology of the underdog, attracting the actual poor and dispossessed, as well as those who feel oppressed or marginalised, in all corners of the globe.

There is a strong historical basis to this. The practice of Islam is dominated by the world's poor. It has always been attractive to them due to its strong egalitarian flavour, and especially attractive to lower status groups living in very hierarchical societies. The most obvious case is in the subcontinent, where the untouchables of the caste system rapidly embraced Islam, freeing them from a life of bondage. The large number of Hindus, especially those of high caste, who look down on Muslims today has its roots in this phenomenon. The pattern is replicated in southern Thailand, the Malays or with regard to Muslim peasants in western China.

In much of the spread of Islam (often through conquests) it was often the poor who were the first

to convert, both for economic reasons in order to avoid the tax on non-Muslims as well as the strong social incentive. As Muslims, they were often freed from much more demeaning social titles.

In the West, Muslim migrants were often among the poorest arrivals. This is true of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain, North Africans in France and the influx of Lebanese refugees into Australia.

It is these groups who can perceive themselves as marginalised or undervalued in their society and thereby feel a connection with the 'real' poor and dispossessed Muslims in other parts of the world.

It is easy for them to feel a common bond with the Palestinians and Chechens, fuelled by television images, united by a sense of feeling hard done by. Muslims in South East Asia can look to rich Chinese businessmen as their local version of the Israelis. The British Pakistanis can jump on any criticism of Muslims in the press as evidence of their oppression by the white or Jewish elite. The Moroccan immigrant in France can be turned away from a Parisian nightclub and feel that he is like a Chechen resistance fighter ambushed by a Russian tank.

Islam's growth in Europe as the most vibrant ideology of the downtrodden is part of a wave of religiosity that has swept the Arab world in the past 30 years, propelled by frustration over feeble economies, uneven distribution of wealth and the absence of political freedom.

### Islamism and leftism

Like communism, Islam represents for many of its devoted adherents a transnational ideology tilting toward an eventual utopian vision, in this case of a vast, if not global, caliphate governed according to Shariah law.

The French scholar on European Islam, Oliver Roy, notes that 'Islam has replaced Marxism as the ideology of contestation. When the left collapsed, the Islamists stepped in.'

This trend is being displayed politically most clearly in the Arab world, where a large number of old socialists are finding it easy to slide into Islamist parties.

Veteran foreign correspondent Mary Ann Weaver writes in her book *A Portrait of Egypt*:

A number of my former professors from the American University of Cairo were

Marxists 20 years ago: fairly adamant, fairly doctrinaire Marxists. They are now equally adamant, equally doctrinaire Islamists.

This is an interesting phenomenon because one of the key factors in the uptake of socialism was that significant sections of the urban intelligentsia found it attractive. This has, by and large, not been the case with Islamism.

But that trend is beginning to change in the Arab world, where socialists are seeing their ideals having more opportunity through Islamist parties. The Egypt example is crucial because the country has often been the leader in the region.

Political Islam is also supplying the social services in a collective context that communism promised, and the status of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah depends on this. Their facilities are often described as superior to those provided by the ruling governments.

It's particularly true in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood won one-fifth of the vote in elections last year on the back of an extensive social programme that included running schools and 22 hospitals across the country.

Despite ideological shifts in the Arab world, it is this strong overlap with the world's poor, in combination with its association with some of the world's flashpoints, that has allowed a natural connection of today's Islam with Western progressive groups.

While the left represent the poor outright, Islamists will argue they are doing God's work but appeal to the poor for they represent a fertile ground of resentment.

They both have a natural enemy in the United States and a contempt for the deregulated market economy, believing the system is designed to suit the needs of the powerful. They cite inequality in the world's incomes and over half a billion people in poverty as evidence. The greatest triumph for anti-globalisation protesters came not from rallies around WTO meetings, but through September 11 via Osama bin Laden.

### Political violence

With regard to the use of violence to spread the ideological revolution, modern Islamic movements like al-Qaeda have some interesting parallels with

early Marxism.

There was considerable tension among early communists about whether the revolution required violence or whether the engine of history could be relied upon to ensure an eventual victory. Those who advocated a degree of violence then debated whether it was important to first establish a model state that could inspire revolution elsewhere. Some leaders like Lenin believed in the idea of a vanguard, an ideological army, that could use force initially before convincing others of their vision when in power.

There is much overlap with Sayyid Qutb. Qutb believed that human structures were inherently evil and required overthrowing. He recognised that most people were not ready to do this and required a steady period of re-education. The implication was that once humanity had been reformed, state structures would collapse and we would all live in

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the peace and harmony of God's law, a situation that apparently occurred during the first generation of Muslims alone.

Qutb, like Lenin, believed in the idea of a vanguard to take up the fight initially, before the populace was ready. He also shared the dilemma of the early Marxists about whether this required a violent uprising and if there was a requirement for the establishment of a model state first, as a beacon to inspire other lands.

The basic premises of the moral corruption and illegitimacy of current state structures, the need to transform humanity before entering that world, the need to seize power in a single state before spreading to others, the error of any human group holding sovereignty over others and the need for a revolutionary vanguard is very similar in both movements.

The al-Qaeda worldview is very much inspired by the strict Wahhabi interpretation of the Koran, colloquially known as desert Islam, not followed by the majority of the world's Muslims. The use of violence is heavily disputed within Islam, as it was on the left.

There will obviously be many differences in the details between the two ideologies, not least that Marxism was atheistic. But on a symbolic level, there are many similarities even with the more moderate forces of Islam, which view the West as materially prosperous but morally decadent, the so called 'great tempter'. There are some both on the left and within Islam who want to curb the influence of Western culture and foreign policy.

### Political implications

As far as domestic politics is concerned, there is just too much of a gulf between Islamic groups and the left in the areas of civil liberties to sustain any meaningful bond. Islam openly despises homosexuality and views the liberation of women suspiciously, believing it is the major cause of an apparent breakdown in the family. These views could not possibly sit comfortably with progressive groups.

However, there is growing agreement among some on the left that free expression has gone too far. This can be seen in laws against racial and religious vilification, and feminist criticism of sexualised images of women. Many on the left view criticism of Islamic groups as opportunistic, emboldening conservatives for their narrow ends. These beliefs would resonate with Muslims.

The potential for any meaningful cooperation remains very much in the realm of foreign policy, where the ideological overlap is much clearer.

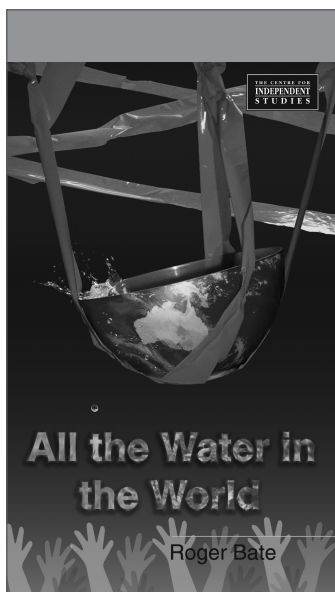
Like the Cold War, parts of the left work against Western interests and actions in the international arena. This is why they appear in joint protests with Muslim groups against military action by Western countries.

Their growing overlap with Islamist interests should, however, worry large sections of the left. A desire to avoid offending their new allies is likely to hamper their voice condemning human rights abuses within the Islamic world, occurrences that are all too common.

Only last month, three women in Iran were sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. Last year a woman was sentenced to death for a crime she committed when she was seventeen, despite Iran being a signatory to the treaty forbidding the death penalty for minors.

The case of Iraq is one where all criticism is aimed at the US, when the Islamists are the ones determined to prevent any improvement for Iraqi lives, killing indiscriminately in the process. Every Iraqi I have met has supported the push for democracy and despised the current crisis, blaming the insurgents. I am yet to hear the same criticism emanating from groups that opposed the invasion.

In trying to voice their sympathy for a perceived victimisation of Muslims by the world's powerful, progressive groups risk neglecting domestic sources of oppression and poverty in the Islamic world.



### All the Water in the World

by Roger Bate (Non-Resident Fellow of CIS and a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute)

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