

NOVEMBER 21-23, 2014

THE *NEXT* LAST GREAT WAR: THE NEXT BATTLE FOR MODERNITY

— M.J. Akbar

Wars begin with a preamble, mostly confused, and end with a postscript, often bitter. The link between Versailles in 1919 and 1939 is standard knowledge. The Cold War began at Yalta, where Europe was divided between victors who then mobilized to protect what they had won.

If the Cold War ended with Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, then that is precisely where the war against terrorism began.

It should not come as a surprise that allies in Afghanistan turned on each other almost immediately after victory. The conquerors of 1945 did much the same. But if America and Europe are shocked by the sudden swell of Islamism, it is only because they ignored the second narrative of 1919, the dismemberment and colonization of the last great Muslim empire, the Ottoman Caliphate.

A hundred years after 2014, the First World War has looped back to link with the fourth.

Less than seven decades before 1919, Britain had buried what was left of the Mughal Empire on the Indian subcontinent, home to the largest ethnic Muslim population in the world. (The more ribald Victorian politicians teased the Ottomans with the thought that Queen Victoria was the real Caliph, since she had far more Muslim subjects.)

In 1919, a startling thing happened: every single Muslim land was colonized or occupied by Europe. The humiliation was almost too much to bear.

As Muslims from the Ganges to the Nile searched for revival, they also took comfort in lament. A powerful motif was the romance of the Caliphate, which became more glorious in memory than it

had ever been in reality. The Caliphate represented security for Islam and its holy cities in an age when Muslims were under siege; it was an emotional symbol of glory; and its law, Sharia, was reassuring to Muslims who perceived it as a safety net against the potential tyranny of their own despots.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi used the high-voltage appeal of the Caliphate to draw Muslims into his mass campaign between 1919 and 1922 against British rule. The ultimate irony, of course, was that Turkey abolished the Caliphate in 1924.

Turkey, under Mustafa Kemal, took a rational route into the 20th century. It recognized that Caliphs, like the Hapsburgs and Tsars, belonged to an age that had outlived its utility. The Indian Muslim elites eased their anxieties by carving out, with a British knife, a separate state in 1947 – Pakistan, a unique country that straddled either side of a subcontinent, and they fondly believed that faith could unite what God's geography had divided.

Pakistan could have become a Turkey in South Asia; instead it attempted to mix theocratic impulses with democratic intentions, and succeeded in achieving the worst of both worlds. Pakistan became the first Islamic state in the post-colonial era, and, inevitably, a sanctuary for myriad terrorists flying the flag of Jihad in order to gain popular legitimacy. The Arab world was cut and stripped with abandon by its British and French masters after 1919, and turned into a haven for neo-colonization. Neo-colonization, of course, is the grant of independence on condition you do not exercise it.

This might have worked if it had been accompanied by economic empowerment and democratic freedoms, but perhaps the suggestion itself is a

contradiction. Family systems soon blurred the difference between personal wealth and national resources.

Every experiment, whether born on the left or right, gravitated towards soft or hard dictatorships. The West did not help by using war, or regime change through more insidious means, to protect its domination.

Any failure of modernity is an invitation to an imagined past. As other models, from royal paternalism, to Nasserite populism, to Baathist liberalism, to Army despotism, and finally a brief upsurge of democratic spirit, collapsed, or were suppressed, the last idea standing was a return to faith.

Except that no one quite knew what this meant in a contemporary context. What transpired was less the faith of Medina and more the reinvention of thinkers like Abdul Wahab in Arabia and Shah Waliullah in India, who fed insecurity and extremism into despair to arouse a Jihad that has become demented in its search for chaos wrapped in the illusion of liberation.

The degeneration has been swift. Today the region between Pakistan and North Africa is an arc of turbulence, in which most governments survive in isolation while nations spin out of control.

A fundamental requirement of Jihad in Islamic theory is that it can only be declared by the state. The proliferation of maverick Jihad is evidence of the dangers when practice abandons theory.

This, however, is little solace to this Jihad's targets: the "far enemy," principally America; the "near enemy," or those hostile to them in their immediate environment; and the "third enemy," countries which "occupy" Islamic space. India and China (because of Muslim-majority Xinjiang) are in the last group.

But long before this Jihad damages others, it will devastate Muslim communities that fail to comprehend their existential dilemma: the challenge of modernity. Modernity has four non-negotiable fundamentals: democracy, freedom of faith (including the right to non-belief), gender equality, and economic equity through which the poor feel that they have a legitimate share of rising prosperity.

Many countries today are successful without being modern, since they fail on the first two counts. Wars are being fought not merely for the variables of geographical space, but also for social change or regression.

The difference between victory and defeat in the aforementioned turbulent arc will mean the difference between a stable world order and an expanding vacuum teeming with shadow militias with a vested interest in chaos.

M.J. Akbar is the National Spokesperson of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India.

