



Arabization Changing Face of Islam in Asia

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While analyzing radical Islam in Asia, commentators point to a number of factors to explain its growth. These include Muslim grievances about their culture and way of life not being given what they consider their rightful place in their own societies; transnational links with organizations across the border, the increasing fervour of those who adhere to radical forms of Islam following September 11; hostility to the policies of the West, in particular the United States; anger at US support of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians; contempt for US occupation of Iraq; and opposition to crackdown on domestic militancy carried out by previously permissive governments like those in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

The factors have contributed to a sense of growing alienation and feeling of victimization and oppression among certain Muslim groups, and to an attempt to redress their grievances and frustrations through violence and terror. What is disturbing is that the advocates of such violence and terror believe in a self-conceived sense of martyrdom, and justify their actions in the name of an exclusionary, obscurantist, deviant and grotesque form of Islam.

I EXPLAINING "ARABIZATION"

Fuelling the above new Islamic identity is the steady process of transformation from a secular, inclusive and an adaptive Islam to a more textual, ritualistic and exclusive one by exogenous forces, as ideas, practices and finances flow from the Arab world. The transformation brings about conflicts – not only within Islam as to its correct interpretation and desirable way of life, but also among Muslims and

others in otherwise tolerant and harmonious plural societies like India, where Islam was renowned for its adaptability to local practices, tolerance of other religions and contribution to its composite culture. Over the past three decades, however, fundamentalists have tried to homogenize Islam, introducing new tensions.

This process of homogenization could be referred as "Arabization" of Islam emphasizes rituals and code of conduct more than substance and Islam's universalism. It stems from the "the Wahabi creed," a rigid branch of Islam exported from and subsidized by the government of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism is distinct in its destructive nature when religion is used by the state for political ends. Unlike other traditions that accommodate dissenting views, the Wahhabis claim to possess an undebatable version of 'true Islam'. Arabization of Islam is a trend that somewhat obscure many Muslims from the real divine value of Islam.

More importantly, a fundamental transformation is taking place within the Muslim community all over the world – an identity formation based on a world view taken from early Quranic precepts and a code of conduct resembling a way of life that was prevalent in the Arab world in the mediaeval period in the formative stage of Islam.

This form of identity is premised on an understanding and a belief that to be a true Muslim one has to be different from 'others' in every aspect of life and that there can not be a meeting ground between Islam and other religions. Adaptation of other customs, traditions and cultures in its path toward the expansion of the religion had only led to aberration and corruption of original and pristine ideas of Islam. It is only through the practice of mediaeval Arab traditions and way of

life that the evil eyes of other religions can be kept at bay.

Such a world view based on Arabization of Islam may not be the most predominant among the Muslims of the world yet, but is surely gaining slow and steady ground. A strong sense of grievance and victim mentality has reinforced Islam's role as a medium for asserting identity. The external manifestation is the wearing of Middle Eastern clothes by men and women. Strict observance of fundamentalist Islam is also a means of asserting identification with reform and protesting upper-class corruption in many societies, which might somewhat explain fundamentalists' prescription for austere way of life free from temptations and pleasures.

The use of the term 'Arabization' begs clarification. Since the original Muslims were mostly Arab, everything associated with them - their culture, names, and family structures - has been associated with Islam. But this presents a problem since the vast majority of Muslims in our current world are not Arab. There is not even an Arab monolithic form of Islam and culture. Some might

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even suggest that passing off Arab culture as Islam in this regard is inaccurate, exclusionary, and disrespectful of other Muslims' cultures evolving through a blend of religious and local traditions and customs. This is where the use of the term 'Arabization' gains salience. Despite the fact that only a fraction of the Muslim community are Arabs,

everywhere in South and Southeast Asia there is a growing trend of imitating and replicating Arab cultures and customs to prove their true Islamic identity at the expense of their own rich syncretic cultures that allowed not only Islam to spread in the whole region but also harmonious inter-faith interactions.

Converts to Islam illustrate the issue poignantly. Having an Arab name makes one seem more "Muslim," because of the way Arab culture is seen as synonymous with Islam. Clothing is another, mostly affecting Muslim women. The 'niqab' (the face-veil) was rarely seen outside of the Arabian world until recently. Most Muslims see the niqab as a byproduct of Arab culture. The urge for a Muslims to wear veils can be traced from a Quranic perception "to wear their veils over their bosoms". The Prophet was urging modesty, not necessarily a particular dress-code. It is only recently that the veil has been interpreted as religiously authentic instead of a cultural expression and therefore a must for all Muslim women.

Arabic language has an important role in the diffusion of this process. Language inevitably imposes cognitive categories that force an individual into a particular symbolic order in thinking, communicating, and the ordering of his experience. Arabic's highly charged sacred character increases its coercive power, making it what Benedict Anderson calls a "truth-language." Arabic is the language of Islam, the language chosen by God to speak to mankind, influences how a person perceives the world and expresses reality. This, in turn, has a profound impact on a society's outlook.

Arabic and Islam are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Arabization and Islamization are inseparable parts of a single cultural ideal that now pervades the Arab world. In their drive toward authentication, and uniformization of Islam, the transmitters (Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries) and the recipients (non-Arab Islamic societies) are equally emphasizing 'Arabization' as the norm of pure and ideal form of Islam to be followed by Muslims all over the world.

II SPREAD OF WAHABISM

In the Indian subcontinent, a thousand years of Muslim presence obviously brought a fusion between it and an ancient deep-rooted civilization with its in-built strength and resilience. Like in other societies, Islam in India had to adapt to local beliefs, customs and cultures. The end result was a flowering of a composite culture to which Hindus and Muslims both contributed. Popular religion, in many places, consisted of

myriad cults of diverse origins, incorporating Sufi, 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' elements. With the advent of Wahhabi movement and the opening up of Deobandi schools, the syncretic Islam in India came under pressure from the proponents of orthodox Arab form of Islam. As a consequence all customs that were 'un-Islamic' were seen as aberration and therefore to be shunned by all means, and the individual believer must consciously strive to mould himself consciously on the model of the Prophet, presented in a form that was inextricably related to seventh century Arab culture.

During the 1970s, Wahhabi clerics encouraged the spread of their ideology into Saudi universities and mosques, because it was seen as a barrier to the threat of cultural Westernization and spread of corruption that accompanied the 1970s oil boom. Consequently, the royal family and their religious establishment looked for a cause with which to deflect the growing zealotry from Wahhabist theofascism, a danger highlighted by the seizure of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by heavily armed Islamic Studies students in 1979. The diversion that the royal family seized upon was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Wahhabism gained considerable influence in the Muslim world following a tripling in the price of oil in the mid-1970s. Having the world's largest reserves of oil but a relatively small population, Saudi Arabia was in a position to spend tens of billions of dollars throughout the Muslim world promoting Islam, and in particular Wahhabism, which was sometimes referred to as "petro-Islam". Its largess funded an estimated "90% of the expenses of the entire faith," throughout the Muslim world. It extended to young and old, from children's madrassas to high level scholarship. "Books, scholarships, fellowships, mosques" were paid for. It rewarded journalists and academics who followed it; built satellite campuses around Egypt for Al Azhar, the oldest and very influential Islamic university. The financial power of Wahhabist advocates has done much to overwhelm less strict local interpretations of Islam, and has caused the Saudi interpretation to be perceived as the "gold standard" of religion in many Muslims' minds.

Saudis had spent some \$90 billion, according to one estimate, to export Wahhabism globally. Much of this Saudi funding went towards the

establishment of Wahhabi-dominated religious schools, colleges, and other social and cultural infrastructure, while in non-Muslim countries alone, the Saudis financed the construction of some 2,000 schools, 1,500 mosques, and 210 Islamic centers between 1982 and 2002.

Saudi financial power also means that it can control key Muslim publishing houses, promoting Wahhabi texts and ensuring the suppression of Sufi, Shi'a, and other Muslim works now deemed non-Islamic. It also supports the training of imams and endowments to universities (in exchange for influence over the appointment of Islamic scholars). The lack of a formal ecclesiastical hierarchy within Sunni Islam renders traditional religious institutions weak in the face of well-funded Wahhabi missionary activities.

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In Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and southern Thailand, Wahhabis have co-opted (or replaced) village and neighborhood imams, and there is a fresh stream of converts returning from stays as guest workers in Saudi Arabia. The children of poor converts are often taken to Saudi Arabia for "education" and many are returned as cannon fodder for use by Wahhabi terrorist fronts. In India, efforts are underway to capture a portion of our huge Muslim minority. In Southern part of India, even a few years ago, one could not distinguish between a Hindu and a Muslim from either his dress or language.

Once the Muslims from Southern India started going to the Gulf countries for jobs, many of them returned getting acculturated to the Arabic language, dress and customs, resulting in visual divide between the two communities. In India in recent years, a growing number of madrassas graduates have been enrolling in higher

institutions of Islamic learning in the Arab world. This is particularly the case of graduates of educational institutions associated with the Jama'at-i Islami, the Deobandis and the Ahl-i Hadith, all three of which are fiercely opposed to a range of popular customary practices and preach forms of 'Wahhabi' Islam.

Once they return to India, graduates of madrassas and Islamic universities in the Gulf States often go on to teach in madrassas or set up Islamic institutions of their own on a form of Islam that they have imbibed during their years of study in the Arab world. Such institutions publish literature, in Urdu, English, Hindi and regional languages, opposing many aspects of popular Indian Muslim culture, reiterating the notion that key aspects of medieval Arab culture are integral to their way of imagining Islam. The spate of bombings in Benaras, Jaipur, Bangalore and Ahmedabad and the suspected role of SIMI (Student Islamic Movement of India) demonstrates clearly how Islam has undergone transformation in India and the extent of indigenization of terror networks.

III CONCLUSIONS

Arabization poses a threat to all Muslims who believe in Islam's divine character and universalism, and can be combated only by them. It is not a crisis between civilizations as Huntington would have us believe, but a crisis within civilization and can be fought from within. Arabization's major appeal emanates from Islam's millenary expectations and the unfounded utopia of a just and prosperous society under Islamic rule. This is also fed by the silence of the moderates in the face of the more vocal minority trying to hijack Islam for their perverted gain.

Christianity has passed through this phase and the contradictions between the sacred and the profane was resolved by separating the church from the state during the period of renaissance and reformation. If the powerful, modern, ideas of 'jehadi' Islamism are not met in the marketplace of ideas with an equally vigorous, contemporary, articulation of peaceful, syncretic and inclusive Islam, then 'the center of gravity' of public discourse will inevitably slide towards those ideas that appear most powerful and relevant to the modern world.

The progressive interpretation of Islam developed by late Nurcholish Madjid and his friends, such as former president Abdurrahman Wahid in

Indonesia, Anwar Ibrahim and Chandra Muzaffar in Malaysia, Surin Pitsuan in Thailand, who is now the current secretary general of ASEAN, and Ashgar Ali Engineer and many other progressive Muslim intellectuals in India, represent a powerful alternative to 'jehadi' Islamism.

The need of the hour for the Muslims in Asia is to de-Arabize Islam from its exclusivist mould and promote a more inclusive Islam based on their own indigenous cultures and traditions blending with universal message of Islam, as were case in India and Indonesia in the period before the inroad of the Islam of the desert. There is also an urgent need for the moderates to break their deafening silence against tyranny of the small minority who are bringing shame and bad name to the religion and shed their inertia and fear of being branded as not 'good Muslims' by their perverted radical minority

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