

Interview with Tariq Ali

'US fundamentalism has created massive despair'

TARIQ ALI is a socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-war campaigner. He has recently written a new book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*. Tariq spoke to **KEVIN OVENDEN** and **TALAT AHMED** about some of the issues the book deals with

THE MAIN explanation in the media for 11 September is that it was a product of irrational fundamentalism. How would you answer this?

THE PEOPLE who struck back at the United States were people it had trained. Al Qaida was a group which had fought for them and with them in Afghanistan, and not just in Afghanistan.

We now have information released by the Dutch government that Al Qaida was fighting shoulder to shoulder with the United States in Bosnia. Al Qaida were people the United States had systematically used in waging some of its wars and some of its "jihad".

When these people were finally dumped by the United States they turned on it. Al Qaida then utilised the very deep discontent in Saudi Arabia and Egypt against those regimes to win support. The bulk of their cadres come from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, not Afghanistan. Many serious American commentators had warned the United States of this. Chalmers Johnson had warned one year before 11 September that, given what the US were doing in the world, someone was going to hit the United States.

Yet his book was attacked and denounced in the American press. He was within the heart of the American intelligence and academic establishment. This is not something that only the left is saying. The US was attacked by people it had worked with against the left, against Communism, against secular nationalism, against any radical solution in the Islamic world.

To say this isn't to justify what happened, but to try and understand it. All the evidence we have shows the US is making all the same mistakes again. They've gone and killed 4,000 innocent people in Afghanistan and the problem is still not solved for them.

They've destabilised Pakistan by giving the fundamentalists inside the army a stronghold with which to destabilise Musharraf once the American arms and money stops flowing, which it will. While fundamentalism is very weak in Pakistani society as a whole, it is very strong inside the state apparatus because it was created by that state apparatus.

This is something which is going to explode over the next few years. The US has destabilised the whole subcontinent. The Indian regime is hardcore Hindu fundamentalist, which is not appreciated in the West. That regime says, if the US can go and kill people and bomb countries to stop terrorism, then we can as well. That is the logic imperialism creates. It is followed by little or big regional powers.

Now the US are going to make the biggest mistake, one for which they will pay a heavy price sooner or later-that's the invasion of Iraq. What they are planning to do is to take the Kurdish areas of Iraq, create a protectorate, seal off the oil wells from Saddam Hussein and let him starve. They will steal the oil in Iraq and Balkanise Iraq. They don't care what happens. They are not going to allow the Iraqi people ever to choose their own government.

They aren't even bothering to say that this has anything to do with humanitarianism or democracy.

YOU HAVE used the phrase "US imperialism is the mother of all fundamentalisms". What do you mean?

WHEN I said that I meant it politically, militarily and economically. The economic thing we should never, never underestimate. The neo-liberal universe the American Empire has created and the Anglo-Saxon model which has been thrust down the throats of large parts of the world has created despair on a massive scale.

People will react in different ways. Some people will turn to religion. Other people, feeling the parties of the centre left are incapable of dealing with it, will turn to the right as we've seen in France.

One shouldn't totally see the turn in France as related to hostility to Arabs and immigrants. A part of it is, but that too is caused largely by the economic crisis. People will punish their regimes in different ways. The sooner the trade unions and social democratic organisations wake up to this, the better. But far from waking up to it, we have people pandering to it. Peter Hain is now saying the real problem is asylum seekers.

He and his government are pushing through neo-liberal policies every single day. People are being killed as a result in Britain because of it, with the train crashes.

Over 80 percent of the British population want the trains taken back into public ownership. This government won't do it. Then Hain, this little pipsqueak, has the nerve to stand up and say we have to curb asylum seekers.

The strategy of people like him is always to blame the victims. That's normally been the strategy of the extreme right and the authoritarians. Now Blunkett and Hain are jumping on that bandwagon. Privately they are saying we're doing this to take the ground from the right. But if you do it by becoming right wing yourself, then who needs an authoritarian right?

SOME PEOPLE say that Muslims are very conservative and don't want to integrate into British society.

SUCH PEOPLE never talk about Christian fundamentalism or conservatism. In the US a born-again Christian is president. The American Attorney General, Ashcroft, has prayer meetings every morning, and he composes hymns himself which he

sometimes sings to bemused employees of the Department of Justice! Tony Blair is a hardcore Christian. He is proposing single faith schools in British society.

Hain says the problem is Islam. I think that the problem is this government. Why doesn't Hain attack Blair for saying single faith schools are a great idea?

One of the things that comes across in your book is an understanding of why people look to Islamism. Do you think different social forces can be expressed through religious ideas?

YES. THIS has happened historically over the last 500 years. In the English Revolution the texts and holy scriptures were the way social forces expressed themselves. When there are social forces, movements and alienation, then people will go where they can find expression.

When you have countries where all politics is banned, where the left has been wiped out, and where no secular thought is permitted, and where the only doors open are the doors of the mosque, then it is not surprising the mullahs tend to dominate the discourse.

How do you think the left should relate to this?

THE ONLY way the left can relate is to be seen to be ultra-staunch anti-imperialists. You cannot make any headway- you cannot even open a dialogue on anything else- unless young Muslims realise you are anti-imperialists. I've found this personally. Speaking all over world, young people come to my meetings-they talk to me- they argue with me.

They are interested to talk because they know I'm hostile to imperialism and what it represents. The idea that the only future for the world lies with the West and the only emancipatory project is the United States has absolutely no purchase on these young people, and for good reason. They can see through it.

The United States have sustained the most reactionary regimes in the Arab world for many years. Saudi Arabia has been sustained by them since the 40s-for 60 years they've kept one family in power in Saudi Arabia. One has to be very upfront, very sharp on imperialism-then we open a debate with people.

To these young Muslims who come on the anti-war demonstrations we must be straight, and say that we do not agree with you at all on religion. No religion offers resolution to the crisis created by the global capitalist steamroller. In fact religion represents a retreat from the world as it exists. But we are happy to march with you against the wars being waged by the American Empire. The left has to position itself and win people over to its ideas. You can't do it from the sidelines, or writing columns in the Guardian or Observer.

This is a totally alienated generation, both growing up here and abroad. I see that everywhere. They don't think the left has been very helpful to them in the past.

We have to say to them that we are totally opposed to what the West intends to do to that region and we will fight against it. That then enables the building of a bridge, and people have to travel across that bridge, and discuss and debate. You have to educate young Muslims to think in a broad way. For example, the whole of Latin America is oppressed.

The most recent thing the United States did was to try to overthrow the Chavez regime in Venezuela, because it was not a pro-US regime although it was democratically elected.

Most importantly, one has to try and convince young Muslims that you can only defeat the American Empire ideologically if the ideas you are putting forward are superior to those which exist in the United States. That can't be supplied by any religious fundamentalism-either Islamic, Jewish or Christian.

The real tragedy is that many young and old Islamic fundamentalists have no idea of the history of their own religion. They don't know there is a rich streak in it of dissent and heresy, and this used to be debated often. I say very openly that I'm an atheist, a materialist and have never been a believer. It's important to be open.

I remember my closest ten friends I grew up with in Pakistan, and none of them were religious and they were from every social class. There are millions and millions of secular people in the Islamic world who don't speak out, but who privately agree with most of the things we say.

Taking on warmonger

TARIQ ALI debated with pro-war writer Christopher Hitchens in front of 1,000 people in London last week. Tariq made the point that the US war on Afghanistan had not brought any solution to the people there. Its effects were still being felt around the world:

"Large numbers of Taliban fighters are now back in Pakistan. They want to destabilise Pakistan and provoke a war with India. That is why they are attacking churches, why they killed the US journalist Daniel Pearl. The regime in Kabul doesn't even represent the armed who took the city. When the US withdraws, the regime will fall."

Later Tariq responded to the argument that Muslim regimes pose the greatest threat to peace and democracy around the world:

"The Taliban regime was despised in large parts of the Muslim world, including Pakistan and Iran. The only place it was not disliked was Saudi Arabia, the mother of support for the Taliban. This was especially true during the 1980s, when the Taliban was seen as a force that could defeat the Soviet Union. Former US national security chief Brzezinski said that supporting the Taliban was a price worth paying, that the Soviet Union was the biggest enemy, and a few stirred-up Muslims were not a big price to pay to defeat it. The Islamic clerics have been in power for the last three

decades in Iran. Some 60 percent of the population of Iran are under 25 and have known nothing else. Now if you look at Iran, there is more ferment, more opposition and more challenging ideas than anywhere the West has interfered. You can't fight against Islamic fundamentalism unless you fight against US imperialism."

<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/1801/sw180116.htm>