Tariq Ali Prologue to his book The Clash of Fundamentalisms

The honour of great peoples, is to be valued for the beneficience, and the aydes they give to peoples of inferiour rank, or not at all. And the violences, oppressions, and injuries they do, are not extenuated, but aggravated by the greatness of the peoples, because they have least need to commit them. The consequences of this partiality toward the great, proceed in this manner. Impunity means Insolence; Insolence, Hatred; and Hatred an Endeavour to pull down all oppressing and contumelious greatnesse.Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651Tragedies are always discussed as if they took place in a void, but actually each tragedy is conditioned by its setting, local and global. The events of 11 September 2001 are no exception. There exists no exact, incontrovertible evidence about who ordered the hits on New York and Washington or when the plan was first mooted. This book is not primarily concerned with what happened on that day. A torrent of images and descriptions has made these the most visible, the most global and the best-reported acts of violence of the last fifty years.I want to write of the setting, of the history that preceded these events, of a world that is treated virtually as a forbidden subject in an increasingly parochial culture that celebrates the virtues of ignorance, promotes a cult of stupidity and extols the present as a process without an alternative, implying that we all live in a consumerist paradise. A world in which disappointment breeds apathy and, for that reason, escapist fantasies of every sort are encouraged from above. The growing crisis in Argentina, a symbol of the dead-end that market-fundamentalism had reached, came to a head on 5 September 2001. It was ignored. A multi-class uprising followed. Two presidents fell within the space of a fortnight.The complacency of this world was severely shaken by the events of 11 September. What took place - a carefully planned terrorist assault on the symbols of US military and economic power - was a breach in the security of the North American mainland, an event neither feared nor imagined by those who devise war-games for the Pentagon. The psychological blow was unprecedented. The subjects of the Empire had struck back.I want to ask why so many people in non-Islamic parts of the world, were unmoved by what took place and why so many celebrated, in the chilling phrase of Osama bin Laden, an 'America struck by almighty Allah in its vital organs'. In the Nicaraguan capital, Managua, people hugged each other in silence. In Porto Alegre, in the deep south of Brazil, a large concert hall packed with young people erupted in anger when a visiting Black jazz musician from New York insisted on beginning his performance with a rendering of 'God Bless America'. The kids replied with chants of 'Osama, Osama!' The concert was cancelled. There were celebrations on the streets in Bolivia. From Argentina the Mothers who had been demonstrating for years to discover how and when the local military had 'disappeared' their children refused to join the officially orchestrated mourning. In Greece the government suppressed the publication of opinion polls that showed a large majority actually in favour of the hits, and football crowds refused to observe the two-minute silence.In Beijing the news came too late in the night for anything more than a few celebratory fireworks, but in the week that followed the reaction became clearer. While the Politburo dithered for over twenty-four hours, Hsinhua, the official Chinese news agency, put out a short video of the 11 September footage, complete with Hollywood music so that the moment could be relished at leisure. A second video mixed images of the events with footage from King Kong and other disaster movies. Beijing students interviewed by the New Yorker spoke openly of their delight. Some of them reminded the shocked journalist of the lack of response in the West when NATO planes had bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Only six Chinese had been killed compared to the three thousand in New York, but the students insisted that for them the six were as important as the three thousand.The necessity to explain these reactions does not mean justifying the atrocity of 11 September. It is an attempt to move beyond the simplistic argument that 'they hate us, because they're jealous of our freedoms and our wealth'. This is simply not the case.We have to understand the despair, but also the lethal exaltation, that drives people to sacrifice their own lives. If Western politicians remain ignorant of the causes and carry on as before,

there will be repetitions. Moral outrage has some therapeutic value, but as a political strategy it is useless. Lightly disguised wars of revenge waged in the heat of the moment are not much better. To fight tyranny and oppression by using tyrannical and oppressive means, to combat a single-minded and ruthless fanaticism by becoming equally fanatical and ruthless, will not further the cause of justice or bring about a meaningful democracy. It can only prolong the cycle of violence.Capitalism has created a single market, but without erasing the distinctions between the two worlds that face each other across a divide that first appeared in the eighteenth and became institutionalised in the nineteenth century. Most of the twentieth century witnessed several attempts to transcend this division through a process of revolutions, wars of national liberation and a combination of both, but in the end capitalism proved to be more cunning and more resilient. Its triumph has left the first of these worlds as the main repository of wealth and the principal wielder of uncontrolled military power. The second world, with Cuba the only exception, is governed by elites that either serve or seek to mimic the first. This closure of politics and economics produces fatal consequences. A disempowered people is constantly reminded of its own weakness. In the West a common response is to sink into the routines that dominate everyday life. Elsewhere in the world people become flustered, feel more and more helpless and nervous. Anger, frustration and despair multiply. They can no longer rely on the state for help. The laws favour the rich. So the more desperate amongst them, in search of a more meaningful existence or simply to break the monotony, begin to live by their own laws. Willing recruits will never be in short supply. The propaganda of the deed - the homage paid by the weak to the strong - will endure. It is the response of atomised individuals to a world that no longer listens, to politicians who have become interchangeable, to corporations one-eyed in the search for profits and global media networks owned by the self-same corporations and locked into a relationship of mutual dependence with the politicians. This is the existential misery that breeds insecurity and fosters deadly hatreds. If the damage is not repaired, sporadic outbursts of violence will continue and intensify.Acts of violence depend neither on the will of an individual leader, however charismatic, nor on the structure of a single organisation, the existence of one country or the fanaticism of a sinister religion, its believers fuelled by the visions of a glorious afterlife. The violence, unfortunately, is systemic. It assumes varied forms in different parts of the globe. Nor is it the case that the bulk of this violence is directed against the United States. Religious fanatics of all hues often brutalise co-religionists whose purity is suspect or who are not as vigorous in their search for God and, as a result, are more critical of superstitions or empty and meaningless rituals.There is a universal truth that pundit and politician need to acknowledge: slaves and peasants do not always obey their masters. Time and time again, in the upheavals that have marked the world since the days of the Roman empire, a given combination of events has yielded a totally unexpected eruption. Why should it be any different in the twenty-first century?I want to write about Islam, its founding myths, its origins, its history, its culture, its riches, its divisions. Why has it not undergone a Reformation? How did it become so petrified? Should Koranic interpretations be the exclusive prerogative of religious scholars? And what do Islamist politics represent today? What processes led to the ascendancy of this current in the world of Islam? Can the trend be reversed or transcended? These are some of the issues explored in the hope that they will encourage further discussion and debate within and without the House of Islam.To avoid all possible misunderstandings, a brief confession is in order. Religious beliefs have played no part in my own life. From the age of five or six I was an agnostic. At twelve I became a staunch atheist and, like many of the friends I grew up with, have remained one ever since. But I was brought up in that culture and it has enriched my life. It is perfectly possible to be part of a culture without being a believer.The historian Isaac Deutscher used to refer to himself as a non-Jewish Jew, identifying himself with a long tradition of intellectual scepticism, symbolised by Spinoza, Freud and Marx. I have thought a great deal about this and have, on occasion, described myself as a non-Muslim Muslim, but the appellation doesn't quite fit. It has an awkward ring to it. This is not to suggest that the House of Islam lacks its secular intellectuals and artists. The last century alone produced Nazim Hikmet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Abdelrehman Munif, Mahmud Darwish, Fazil Iskander, Naguib Mahfouz,

Nizar Qabbani, Pramoeda Ananta Toer, Djibril Diop Mambety amongst many others. But these are poets, novelists, film-makers. They have no equivalents in the social sciences. Critiques of religion are always implicit. Intellectual life has become stunted, making Islam itself a static and backward-looking religion.I was born a Muslim. A maternal uncle, who always believed (wrongly) that Islam was the main source of moral strength for the impoverished peasants on our family's feudal estates, muttered the sacred invocation in my right ear. The year was 1943. The venue was Lahore, then under British imperial rule. It was a cosmopolitan city: Muslims constituted a majority, with Sikhs a close second and the Hindus not far behind. Mosques, temples and gurdwaras dominated the skyline in the old city. A tragedy was about to take place, but nobody was aware of the fact. It came four years later in the shape of a monsoon with red rain.I was not quite four that August, when the old British empire finally departed and India was partitioned. A religious state, Pakistan was conceded to the Muslims of India, even though most of them were either indifferent or had no idea of what it would mean. Pakistan literally means 'the land of the pure', something that became the cause of much mirth throughout the country, especially for the refugees who had come voluntarily. Personally, I have no childhood memories of Partition. None. The confessional cleansing which marked that year throughout northern and eastern India as the great sub-continent was divided along religious lines did not affect my childhood. Lahore changed completely. Many Sikhs and Hindus were massacred by their neighbours. The survivors fled to India. Muslims in North Indian cities suffered the same fate. Partitions are often like this, regardless of religion, though its presence brings an added fervour.Later, many years later, my father's old wet-nurse, an extremely sweet and gentle, but deeply religious woman, who had supervised my childhood as well, would recall how she had taken me out on to the streets of Lahore to greet Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. She had bought me a little green and white crescent replica of the emblem of the new state and insisted that I had waved it enthusiastically and chanted 'Pakistan Zindabad' (Long Live Pakistan). If so it was not an experience that I ever had occasion to repeat. I have always been allergic to religious nationalism or its postmodern avatar, religious multiculturalism.In 1947, we had lived on the Race Course Road in a 'protected' part of the city, the section which the British used to refer to as the 'civil lines'. It was isolated from the dense, overcrowded old walled city that had been constructed around the Fort long before the last of the Great Mughals, Aurangzeb, had built the Badshahi (Royal) mosque. Some of the oldest Hindu temples were also situated in the old city, and it was here too that the ashes of the great Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, were interred. Slowly, as is the way with cities, an extension was built and attached to the old. A ring of suburbs spread. Special quarters were constructed for railway workers close to the new railway stations. Around them grew engineering workshops and then came the shopping arcades and the High Courts and Government House, beyond which lay civil lines with their neat bungalows and large lawns. This Lahore was the centre of administration of the old province of the Punjab, which the British used to call 'our sword-arm' or 'our Prussia'.The old city was always much more exciting, with its narrow streets and lanes and its bazaars which specialised in different commodities and wares, including food. It had remained virtually unchanged since medieval times and often, as children, we used to imagine the procession of elephants that brought the Mughal emperor to his palace-Fort and how the local shopkeepers vied with each other to ensure that this or that product was preferred above the rest in the evening when the emperor sampled the city's delights.This, one felt, was the real Lahore. It was here in 1947 that the killings were at their most intense. We were far away from the maddened crowds. Sometimes the screams of victims could be heard by those who lived on the edge of the 'civil lines', and many stories circulated of how bloodstained Sikh men and women were given shelter by good Muslims. But I never heard screams or saw blood, and as for the stories, they all came later.Nobody in my family was killed. We were not going anywhere. We were not destined to form part of the stream of refugees which flowed in both directions. We were the lucky ones. We had always belonged to what was now the Land of the Pure. We were spared the traumas, tragedies and the unbounded anxieties which afflicted millions of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in those terrible times.Few politicians on either side foresaw the

outcome. Jawaharlal Nehru's romantic nationalism portrayed independence as a long-delayed 'tryst with destiny', but even he never imagined that the tryst would drown in blood. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, genuinely believed that the new state would be a smaller version of secular India, with only one difference. Here Muslims would be the largest community and Sikhs and Hindus a loyal minority. He actually believed it would still be possible for him to spend time each year in his large Bombay mansion.Jinnah was shaken by the orgy of barbarism, though Gandhi alone paid the price. For defending the rights of innocent Muslims in the post-Partition India, he, the most religious of nationalist leaders, who had insisted on using Hindu imagery to appeal to the peasants, was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic. That past is corroding the present and rotting the future. The political heirs of the hanged Godse have shoved aside the children of Nehru and Gandhi. Today they exercise power in New Delhi. Politics is being enveloped by the poisonous fog of the religious world. History, unlike the poets of the subcontinent, is not usually prone to sentiment.I loved Lahore. By the time I was at secondary school we had moved from Race Course Road to our own apartments in a large block which my paternal grandfather had built for his five children. These were on Nicholson Road, but very close to the tiny streets and shops of Qila Gujjar Singh, an old Sikh-dominated locality, constructed around a small Sikh fortress. The street names were unchanged. Not that I ever asked myself what had happened to all the Sikhs. My early childhood was dominated by kite-flying and playing cricket with street urchins. It wasn't till much later that I even discovered that Basant, the festival of kites, when the Lahore sky is filled with different colours and shapes as old rivals seek to tangle with and cut down each other's kites, was the millennium-old product of Hindu mythology. For us what was decisive was not the origins of the kite-battles but the quality of string to be purchased. In the old city there were experts in the art of preparing special string for the kites. The string was coated with a mixture of finely crushed glass and glue and then left to dry overnight. I was too busy making sure I had enough money to buy the best-quality string in the market to worry much about history.Awareness came slowly. My family came from the northern extremities of the Punjab, just south of Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, close to the ancient city of Taxila. They were an old landed family belonging to the Khattar tribe, and like others in their position had been forced to take sides in the struggles for power in north India. In his memoirs, the emperor Jahangir complained of their rudeness, boorishness, arrogance and, more important, their obstinate refusal to pay the tribute owed him. The description rings true. Often the family had divided on the question of who governed the Punjab, with a family faction backing each side. This ensured that whoever was in power, the family estates would remain safe. Whether this was collective feudal cunning or the result of blood and property feuds, I have no way of knowing. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. What is certainly true is that in the 1840s the rivalry between two brothers - Sardar Karam Khan and Sardar Fateh Khan - led to the first of them (my great-great grandfather) being murdered by his younger sibling.The two men had gone on a hunting expedition, but an ambush had been carefully prepared. Karam Khan's horse returned to the family home with blood on the saddle. The body was found a few hours later. As news of the murder spread, a neighbouring landlord, fearful that Karam Khan's heirs might be next on the list, gave shelter to the widow and her five sons. He also organised the revenge killing of Fateh Khan. A week later, the sons of Karam Khan were taken into care by General Abbott and provided with British protection. The eldest of them, Sardar Mohammed Hayat Khan (my maternal great-grandfather), remained loyal to the new rulers. He took his own complement of tribal cavalry and fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the British in the Second Afghan War. I will not be writing too much about him in this book.The other wing of the family, the heirs of Cain, referred to contemptuously in family folklore as the 'lesser khans', had earlier sided with the Sikhs against the British and been defeated. Mohammed Hayat Khan, now the head of the family, ensured that this defeat was suitably commemorated. A grateful colonial authority legalised his division of the spoils. Success went to his head. Till then family custom had dictated that the owners of the land did not flaunt their wealth, but lived modestly. Mohammed Hayat's brother Gulab Khan wanted to continue this tradition, but was overruled. A large two-storied manor house was constructed

in the heart of the old village of Wah, a house that could be seen by peasants for many miles. My father once told me of meeting an old peasant woman who described Mohammed Hayat as 'big-headed, big-cocked and a show-off ', which always struck my father as a serious understatement.India could only be ruled with the consent of the indigenous chiefs and rulers. The Mughal emperors had learnt this lesson very quickly. Akbar had even attempted to create a new religion synthesising Hinduism and Islam. Even the more religious-minded Aurangzeb did not attempt any wholesale Islamisation of his army. Some of his ablest generals were Hindu chiefs.The British, when confronted with the nightmare of actually governing India, realised that without serious alliances they would not last too long despite their superior technology. The raj was maintained by a very tiny British presence.My grandfather, Sikandar Hyat Khan, the leader of the Unionist Party (a united front of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landlords), was elected prime minister of the Punjab in 1937, one of the two regions where the Congress Party of Gandhi and Nehru had not made any inroads. He was a staunch believer in a federal India with proper safeguards for all minorities. He died of a heart-attack in December 1942, aged forty-nine, but during his last year in office he had signed a pact with Jinnah, the aim of which was to prevent the Muslim League from arousing crude religious emotions. If he had lived he would have made every possible effort to stop the partition of the Punjab. But would he have succeeded?In fact even Jinnah, as late as June 1946, was prepared to consider a federal solution as proposed by the Cabinet Mission sent to India by the Labour government. It was the Congress Party which made that particular solution impossible. This failure meant that exactly one year before Partition, Hindu-Muslim riots began in eastern India. During four days in August 1946, nearly 5,000 people were killed and three times that number wounded in Bengal. The mood in the Punjab became edgy. Fear overcame rationality.In April 1947 my mother, an active member of the Communist Party, and heavily pregnant with my sister, found herself alone at home. Suddenly a loud knock shook the front door. She rushed to open it and was overcome by anxiety. In front of her stood a giant Sikh. He saw the concern on her face and understood. All he wanted to know was the location of a particular house on the same road. My mother gave him the directions. He thanked her warmly and left. She was overpowered by shame. How could she, of all people, have reacted in that fashion? Lahore had, for many centuries, been a truly multicultural and cosmopolitan city. Now its citizens were overcome by madness.Jinnah conceived of Pakistan as an amalgamation of an undivided Punjab, an undivided Bengal, plus Sind, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province. This prescription would have yielded a Punjab 40 per cent Hindu and Sikh and a Bengal 49 per cent Hindu. It was a utopian solution. Once confessional passions had been aroused and neighbours were massacring each other (as in Bosnia fifty years later) it was difficult to keep the two provinces united.'I do not care how little you give me,' Jinnah is reported as saying in March 1947 to the last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, 'as long as you give it to me completely.'The price of separation was high. Two million dead. Eleven million refugees. Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the most gifted Urdu writers of the subcontinent, wrote a four-page masterpiece entitled 'Toba Tek Singh', set in the lunatic asylum in Lahore at the time of Partition. When whole cities are being ethnically cleansed, how can the asylums escape? The Hindu and Sikh lunatics are told that they will be transferred to institutions in India. The inmates rebel. They hug each other and weep. They have to be forced on to the trucks waiting to transport them to India. One of them, a Sikh, is so overcome by rage that when the border is reached, he refuses to move and dies on the demarcation line which divides the new Pakistan from old India. When the real world is overcome by insanity normality only exists in the asylum. The lunatics have a better understanding of the crime that is being perpetrated than the politicians who agreed to it.A year later, in 1948, a different but comparable process was to transform the Arab world. Another confessional state, Israel, was brought into being. Once again the particularist defeated the universal. In the case of both Pakistan and Israel, the founding fathers were far removed from confessional politics. Mohammed Ali Jinnah was a known agnostic who broke most of the taboos of his religion. Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan were selfproclaimed atheists. Yet religion was used as a central motif in the creation of these two states against the wishes of fundamentalists. The

Jamaat-e-Islami and its Jewish counterparts opposed the formation of these states. The former rapidly adjusted its position. The latter has remained hostile and often shown a far greater sympathy for the dispossessed Palestinians than its secular counterparts.The scale of deaths in Palestine was not the same as in South Asia, but the aggressive and ruthless brutality utilised to drive the Palestinians out of their villages and off their lands created a wound that could never heal. Despite the horrors of Partition, none of the refugees were left stateless or homeless. They were accommodated in India or Pakistan, and in many cases received a degree of compensation for lost property.The Palestinians expelled by the Zionist settlers became people without a state, destined to spend their lives in exile or in the debilitating conditions of refugee camps. None of this had much impact in Pakistan till the triumph of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. It was when Israel joined Britain and France to invade Egypt in 1956 that I first registered what this new state in the Middle East meant for the region. Till then memories of the Judeocide had led one to ignore or underplay the plight of the Palestinians.I became aware of the scale of the catastrophe for the first time while visiting the Palestinian camps in Jordan and Syria in 1967, a few weeks after the Six Day war. I was deeply affected by the wounds inflicted on Palestinian children, the conditions in which the refugees were compelled to live and the stories that poured out of the mothers, sisters and wives. None of the women with whom I spoke at the camps were veiled and only a few had covered their heads. It was then that I thought seriously for the first time of the dual tragedy that had taken place. The sufferings of European Jewry, from the pogroms in Tsarist Russia to the slaughterhouses of Auschwitz and Treblinka, were the responsibility of bourgeois civilisation. The Palestinian Arabs were being made to pay for these crimes, while the West was arming Israel and paying it 'conscience money'.Decades later I was recording a conversation with Edward Said in New York. We agreed that 1917 had been the year that defined the twentieth century. For me the formative event was the Russian Revolution, for him the Balfour Declaration. The collapse of the first and the triumph of the second were somehow also linked to what took place in New York and Washington on 11 September.

http://www.soasstopwar.org/ali2.htm