

The Myth Called 'The Islamic World'

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The term "Islamic World" frequently appears in print and the electronic media thus creating an impression that such an entity exists. Especially after September 11, 2001, the term has taken on a menacing look and evokes great fear in the minds of many people; thanks to the propagandist nature and the global reach of the Western media. The term is portrayed as a monolithic group opposed to the Western World.

However, this is not true in reality. Upon examination, we see that the virtual Islamic World entity does not fulfill the requirements of a cohesive and separate monolith.

For the existence of any viable and forceful entity of such a nature, it should fulfill a few basic requirements:

- Economic self sufficiency
- Similar economic system
- Durable military alliance
- Similar political system
- Similar cultural ethos

Let us now examine the makeup of the Western World. The countries of Western Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand meet all the above criteria in varying degrees and can thus be appropriately termed as the Western World.

As we see:

- All of these countries are economically self-sufficient.
- All of them have the same capitalist economic system – some have less unjust capitalist economy and others, such as the United States, have more unjust capitalist economy.
- The military alliance of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) may have occasional differences, but when it is time to unite against a Third World country, they all get on board without much delay. (Although, Australia and New Zealand are not NATO members, they would undoubtedly get full NATO protection if their national sovereignty was perceived to be endangered in any way).

- All of the above countries follow the **democratic system**. (Of course, with some variance; many offer more social welfare programs whereas the United States – being a capitalist democracy – offer very few.)

Now let's see if some of the major countries of the so called Islamic World meet any of the criteria.

Economic self sufficiency

Only seven Muslim countries (the oil rich Gulf nations of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates or UAE, and the tiny kingdom of Brunei) that in total comprise of a very small fraction of world's Muslims are extremely rich.

However, all their economies are oil-oriented and dependent on the whims of the Western countries – the main consumers of oil. Libya is another oil-rich country which provides some social safety net to its population. (The dependence on Western nations is bound to change as China and India's consumption of oil, due to their rising economies, increases; but that will take some time.)

About 40% of the World's Muslims live in three South Asian countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and (as a minority in) India. Each of these countries has roughly the same number of Muslims. All three have mixed economy – now geared toward more privatization – and are not self sufficient, particularly Bangladesh and Pakistan. Another 15% Muslims live in Indonesia. Comparatively, Indonesia and Malaysia have strong economy; however, the poverty level is too high in Indonesia. Egypt, one of the largest country in the Middle East, is also one of the very few with which the US has a trade surplus, and is one of the largest US aid recipient. However, it is different with another African country Nigeria (which has 50% Muslims and 48% Christians); that is economically strong but has communal problems and economic disparity, which, of course, most of the Muslim countries have.

Economic system

Barring the oil producing countries, other Muslim nations have mixed economies but are showing inclination towards privatizing more of the government sector due to the IMF, World Bank, and the US pressure. (This encourages the local capitalists, who are always waiting in the wing, to twist the government's arm to sell off government utilities and industries at throw-away prices.) It is different that the European Community, where the countries therein, have economic ties. Also, it could prove expensive to do this due to

transportation costs; unlike Europe, Muslim countries do not form one landmass. Muslim countries do have economic forums but they are toothless. And trade among Muslim countries is minimal. One important factor that does not play an obvious role on the economic scene is WOMEN. They make up half of the population but a tiny fraction of them are allowed to work outside the home. Those working inside the house are mostly a miserable lot.

Military Alliance

There is no NATO or any such alliance among the Muslim countries. Occasionally, some neighboring countries form an alliance, such as the one among Syria, Egypt, Jordan and some other Arab countries, during the 1967 war with Israel. But they lack the longevity due to lack of well planned strategy and so soon dies out.

Challenging the Western countries for their wars and exploitation aside, Muslim countries can't even get back, not the whole of Palestine, but just the 22% of the land, comprising of Gaza and the West Bank, which Israel annexed in 1967.

The outsiders (the European Jews) came and took over the Ottoman Empire controlled Palestine and turned it into Israel.

Imagine if some Muslim people were to take over the Balearic Islands (a Spanish state, north of Algeria in the Mediterranean Sea) with less than a quarter of Israel's area, CNN, Fox, BBC, Deutsch Welle, New York Times, you name it would be consumed with this event ad nauseum. In no time flat, Spain will regain these islands, while fully maligning the Muslims and reinforcing the fear of Islam.

Political system

The less said the better. The constitutions are amended whenever the ruler feels that he wants to hold on to power a little longer. The armies in many of the countries don't even remember the barracks. Pakistan, Turkey, and Bangladesh have all seen the army rule. They do have elections but the army is always lurking in the background (and some time, in case of Pakistan, in the foreground as it is happening now with Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kayani who is openly flaunting his wings.)

Iran has elections but then the Islamic Supreme Council is always on politicians' nerves. Egypt has been issued NOC from the US and so it is exempted from holding the elections. (Hosni Mubarak, Anwar Sadat's Vice President, came to power after the Muslim Brotherhood assassinated Sadat in 1981. Referendums were held where Mubarak was the only

candidate, hence there was no opposition. After staying in power for 32 years, Indonesia's Suharto had to step down in 1998 due to the financial crisis. Since then the elected governments have ruled the country.

Oil rich countries have Shahs and Sheikhs where power transfers are hereditary, oil is their personal property, and gambling, womanizing, and hunting are their activities. **Saudi Arabia indulges in another hobby too: beheading.**

Culture

Arab culture is different than the South Asian culture, which has minimal commonality with the African culture which in turn has no resemblance to the Indonesian or Malaysian cultures. The black Muslims in the US have almost no cultural difference between other blacks in the US.

In the US, you can see Muslims from different countries praying together where a tiny fraction of them form organizations; but other than that, the majority of the Muslims mingle among their own ethnic groups. On Fridays, the prayer's end would see South Asians running to nearby South Asian restaurant or grocery store cum restaurant where biryanis, chicken or beef rolls, and other food is waiting to be picked up by worshipers who have ordered this in advance.

Culture in its entirety does not consist of just praying together; it has several other elements involved: food, clothing, arts, cinema, regional politics, scandals, TV dramas, sports, and the most important of them all is the language. A Pakistani Muslim Punjabi would be more comfortable with an Indian Sikh or Hindu Punjabi rather than a Muslim/Hindu Gujarati. The Muslim Bengali from India's Bengal wouldn't hesitate to mingle with a Hindu Bengali from Bangladesh rather than a Hindu/Muslim Marathi. This is true of all the ethnic groups, except for some cosmopolitan people.

The English language is bringing people within a country closer; but the scale is still too small to make any sizeable difference. Religious outlook—strictly Saudi Wahabism or relaxed South Asian style religious observations and practice which include visits to shrines—also are indicators of cultural ethos.

Conclusion

As we noted, this portrait of menacing 'Islamic World' ready to take over the world is conjured up by the western governments and media to maintain unity and peace among the

elite populace within the Western countries to unite against a perceived enemy. On the other hand, the Muslims all over the world are led to believe that there is something called the Islamic World which is not only a powerful force but which can also challenge the western hegemony. This myth is also used by the leaders of the Muslim countries to hide their own shortcomings and weaknesses. This leads some Muslims to join the militant movements hoping to counter the United States.

There is no such entity as Islamic World; instead there are countries where Muslims make up a majority and so they can be called Muslim countries.

(Courtesy: Countercurrents)
