

REVIEW

A Review of *Islam Under Siege*

by S. Azmat Hassan

Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World. By Akbar Ahmed. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003. 213 pp. US\$19.95, paper. ISBN 0745622100.

All nineteen of the hijackers who slammed civilian planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—two of the most visible symbols of American military and industrial strength—were Muslims; fifteen of them from Saudi Arabia. Who were these angry young men, and what impelled them to perpetrate mass murder on that sunny morning of September 11, 2001? That cataclysmic event has inspired a torrent of books and articles examining Islam's role in the contemporary world, many of which are similarly focused. Professor Akbar Ahmed's book *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World*, however, has cast a fresh light on a phenomenon which has profound implications for how different religions and cultures react and interact with each other in the new millennium.

Ahmed, a distinguished anthropologist, former civil servant, and ambassador from Pakistan, is the Ibn Khaldun Professor of Islamic Religion and International Relations at the American University. Widely acknowledged as one of the foremost Islamic scholars, his treatment of the events surrounding 9/11 is refreshingly different from that of most analysts, in that he examines global conflict through an anthropological prism.

Ahmed uses the framework of *assabiya* as propounded by the great medieval Muslim anthropologist Ibn Khaldun, representing a group solidarity by which the world of Islam was ordered for over a thousand years. This relative stability and cohesiveness, however, was dissipated by the rise of the West, propelled by the Industrial Revolution. Large areas of the Islamic world were conquered and colonized by the European powers in the 19th century. In the 20th century, the United States supplanted the European countries as the foremost military and economic power. Bereft of *assabiya*, the Islamic world was unable to cope with the stresses posed by modernity and globalization. Large sections of its population feel threatened and besieged by the relentless onslaught of globalization. It is thus easy for a large mass of angry, unemployed, and exploited people at the mercy of corrupt and repressive rulers to turn their frustration and resentment against the most visible and potent symbol of globalization, the United States of America.

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Fears of being engulfed and marginalized further by Western countries led by the United States has produced the environment in which Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri can whip up anti-American sentiments. These demagogues have manipulated Islam, a religion of peace, and misquoted certain verses of the Quran to proclaim a *jihad*, or holy war, against Christians and Jews. Some American writers and religious leaders have contributed to the understandable bitterness and confusion by attacking Islam as an “evil” and “violent” religion. Akbar Ahmed laments the misperceptions and misunderstandings of the “other” engendered in both the West and the Islamic world. He pleads for a correct understanding of Islam, a great religion which has much in common with Judaism and Christianity and is a part and parcel of the Abrahamic tradition.

His final chapter “What needs to be done” is an eloquent plea for a dialogue between Islam and the West, based on mutual respect and understanding of the predicaments which both civilizations face in dealing with each other. He has himself participated with eminent Americans in such interfaith dialogues. Such exchanges, he argues convincingly, are the only antidote to continued conflict in which terrorism could become even worse. Both sides should take stock of their common goal of producing a more viable and peaceful world, working in unison to confront the perils and promises of globalization. In laying out a hopeful future for mankind by drawing on the best features of the great monotheistic religions; in eschewing finger pointing and antagonistic stereotyping, Akbar Ahmed’s book has made a marked contribution to the debate. In charting a course for decency, compassion, and understanding in our turbulent world, *Islam Under Siege* should be compulsory reading for the policymaker and the layman alike, in the United States and elsewhere.