September 11 – Lesson unlearnt: Continuing the Strategic Analysis Failure

The very appearance of Mr. Bin-Laden and his *al Qaeda* on the world stage has no doubt been a most horrific experience. Naturally, it has provoked both military and political responses that can justifiably referred-to as "war" again international terrorism and more specifically: that staged by what is known as radical Islamic terrorism. Also, the various attacks on Western, mainly American, targets – culminating in the September 11 tragedy – invoked large scale investigation as to the "how" and the "why" that were missed out by the highly experienced intelligence agencies. What perceived to be a colossal failure of such agencies in pre-detecting and preventing the heinous crimes of Bin-Laden & Co. has become a major political – and professional issue. However, the public debate has also led to a "politically correct" distinction between "good" Muslims and radical Islamic terrorists, while "hushing" a key question that should have been asked in view of the actual events and the respond to them by carious Islamic groups (and countries). The question is: why, save for some sporadic cases of Western-based violent groups, like the IRA in Ireland or the ETA in Spain, most, if not all, such groups are somehow associated with Islam? It must be stressed that posing this question does not negate in any way the assertion that most Muslims in the world are indeed as peace-seeking people as the next person. And most likely, the great majority of these people neither support the terrorist groups directly, through participation, nor indirectly – for example, financially. Many of them might, however, support those groups in principle. But if this is the case, how is it that these groups seem to be so well financed? And how is it that almost always there is a link between organisations that are active in social affairs in their communities and the active, violent groups associated with them? And why is it that these associations are always intimately associated with distinct religious leaderships? One may add yet another question: Does it all have anything to do with the fact that much of the money involved in radical Islamic activities – both social and violent – is almost always traceable to Islamic states?

But this is only part of the problem that the Western world seems to ignore. Still other questions might be even more troublesome. For example, why is it that Islamic countries, even the richer ones, suffer from lack of economic progress – or that their riches fail to rich the grass root level? And why these countries are characterised by distinct lack of freedom to be enjoyed by their citizens? Why is the level of female participation in the economic and political processes, or even in their workforce is so low, if not totally nonexistent? Why the rate of socio-economic growth in these countries – even the rich ones – is so significantly low? Is it really just a collection of simple co-incidences? Or maybe we only point here at the unavoidable?

Either way, might it not suggest that the clash we witness is really cultural one? One arising from socio-political realities and processes, coupled with the economic situation faced by both leadership and led in Muslim societies as they interact with the Western world? Possibly - a clash between two distinct civilisations that might be even totally unbridgeable?

To take this discussion to the concrete world: it has long since been established that vast amounts of money, poured by the Saudi authorities into what are supposed to be "charitable organisations" somehow ends up in the hands of religiously-affiliated groups and used to enhance violence rather than to improve the living conditions of the masses, even if some of such money is directed to this goal. Now, while the money trail has been uncovered and even warnings might have been forwarded to the Saudi by the US government, neither congress nor the administration – and not even the intelligence community has truly stopped to ask themselves why it happens.

At most, the analytical process has stopped at the assessment that the regimes in questions, "buy-up" the tolerance of the violent groups so that in return they do not topple or assault their own power centres. Again, this assessment has led to a fairly concerted effort, on the part of the Western powers, to track down and eliminate the "money route" that has even been partly successful. The success was only partial because governments will always be able to by-pass such road blocks. But again, the questions that lay in the basis of the phenomenon do not only remain unanswered but indeed they are not asked. Moreover, it seems that even on that issue of money that is transferred to terrorist organisation, or on that of support and harbouring leaderships of such organisations, the Western world is much less adamant and resolute when it comes to the way it treats such regimes as the Saudi, the Syrian, the Palestinian, the Kuwaiti and their like.

It is argued that this is because Western leaders are afraid that if they are "hard" on these regimes they might offend their own Muslim nationals. If this is the case, we have here yet another piece of evidence of either lack of resolution to tackle what might be, indeed is, a cultural clash between two distinct civilisations or lack of recognition by such leaders that it is so.

Again, the question to be asked is why not even single comment is made about the legitimisation of the use of violence in cultural conflicts that is undeniably inherent in Islam. Indeed, while most Muslims in the world do not embrace or adhere to it, it is still part and parcel of Islam. It is heralded rather openly by those in Islam who are afraid that Western

values and ways of life might win the day and thus bring an end to Islam as these people perceive of it.

This might not be that different from the situation of other religions and it could well have to do with the "age" of the religion in question. The Crusades of about millennium ago might be a good point in case to support this assertion. So maybe the main distinction should be made not between "good" Muslims and "bad" Muslims but between Muslims and Islam.

The idea that we are in the midst of a struggle between civilizations is not new. But it is more complex than just that. For once, while there might be some differences, even significant ones, between Western civilisations – or Judeo-Christian cultures – and other cultures, say East Asian ones, differences that might lead to disagreements, even clashes on issues as trade or on values such as sanctity of life or human rights, this is not the case when it comes to Islam. Here, there are two points that must be taken into consideration.

Firstly, there is the issue of the birth of Islam. Like all other religions, Islam is first and foremost about social control. But as such, it has embarked onto the world stage as the last of the three monotheistic religions. And as a "late-comer", it had to hone its position and views vis-à-vis the other religions that by the time of its inception had already been well and long established. Moreover, its environmental conditions, characterised by the harshness of the desert where Islam was born, coupled with the fact that the life-style of the relevant population was, in the main, nomadic, may have also contributed to the way in which Islam was shaped.

Rightly or wrongly, the founders of Islam may have felt threatened by non-Muslims, or so they had claimed. The fact remains, however, that Islam has spread through the use of the sword. Like zealots of other religions, also in Islam, leaders who wanted to strengthen their ability to control their societies, had incorporated into the holy scripts, also through the religious "Fatwa" – religious rulings – legitimisation for the use of violence "to protect" Islam. Hundreds of years later, that sentiment of threat may have lost its grounds, but leaders aspiring for control or simple bigots, still use these reasoning and justification to exercise social control.

But there is more to it. The very Islamic culture can only sustain itself – or so it seems – through immunisation from foreign influences. It can only endure in "close" societies. And here develops a vicious circle. This entails holding back entire sectors of society, such as women. It also almost automatically requires poverty and lack of education – at least at the level of the masses. Indeed, the UN report on human development shows that more than any other group, Islamic societies are at the end of the list – and not because they are short of resources. Indeed,

some of the Muslim states are by far richer than many other countries that are placed much higher on the UN human development ladder. And the excess of this money doesn't go to improve the living conditions of the population but it does go to support various religious organisations and religious activities. And while some of these are devoted truly and solely to social causes, many, like the Hammas, or the Hiizbulla, run in parallel both charities and violent activities. The cynical observer might suggest that this is exactly the way these regimes believe they can buy immunisation from the violent activities of these organisations. But it goes beyond it. For once, the perennial threat of terrorist activities is a good vehicle for mobilisation of the people and society. But more than that, it is a good way to create a buffer that would enable the regime to isolate its population and to immune it from undesirable Western influence. While they cannot place their population under a total segregation, they can show what they might refer to as the decadence of the West and the unstable situation of Western societies if and when they are under attacks – or even threats – of such groups that fight, so they perceive it – against oppression and discrimination of the True Faith, Islam, and its people.

And while most Muslims do not share this type of sentiments, they can still sympathise with those sacrificing their comfort and at times lives for the Holly Cause. These men and women, defying the Western moral order, take the burden for them, the ordinary people who are unable to reach the height of religious purity as demonstrated by these holly "shahids" – the martyrs. Thus, while not participating in the activities of these "shahids" and even if not actively supporting them, most of the "ordinary" Muslims either approve or at least do not whole-heartedly condemn them. This, it must be said, is still harbouring such activities.

The Western world must realise it all, if it is to eradicate fully and completely terrorist activities by what we call "radical Islam" aimed against the West. This means a total de-legitimatisation of such regimes, as well as of Muslim citizens of countries in Western countries, that do not detach and separate themselves fully and completely from such Islamic activities and rhetoric expressions that might – even remotely – embrace or support those activities associated with Islamic violent or terrorist organisations. It means that sanctions must not only be placed on Iraq but also against Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, The Palestinian Authority, Lebanon and other such regimes that in fact enable terrorism to keep on going. It means also sanctions against a great number of Mullahs, Imams and other local Islamic leaders in the USA, Europe and Asia. It also means looking seriously at the curricula of Muslim schools – and even kindergartens – where enticement has become interwoven into the various subjects taught and where encouragement and support of Islamic martyrdom is practised to a point that it in fact prepare the next generation of "shahids" willing to sacrifice themselves – and many others – on the altar of Islam.

And the question remains open: are we willing to do it? Do we have the courage?