

## ***'Why an Islamic State – the Life projects of Two Great European Muslims***

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Both Muhammad Asad and Alija Izetbegovic were men of wisdom and vision blessed with long and productive lives. Asad is best remembered today for the gripping travel adventure 'Road to Mecca' and a thought-provoking translation and commentary of the Qur'an; Izetbegovic of course was the Muslim hero who became the first president of Bosnia-Herzegovina and led his people with courage and dignity during the wars with the Serbs and Croats in the early to mid 1990s.

The twentieth century has seen many visionaries who have articulated the concept of an Islamic socio-political order. There have also been many false dawns leading to a re-evaluation of strategies within Muslim circles. Asad and Izetbegovic, whose lives straddle the twentieth century, were persistent proponents of Islam's political dimension and the project of establishing a society where the moral and ethical teachings of the religion would find practical expression. They were far from unsophisticated sofa intellectuals and their vision was not shaken by disappointments. There is need to understand their aspirations, appreciate their rationales, and absorb their assessments, particularly in a period when there are misgivings about the vision of an Islamic state.

In a sense, both men discovered Islam for themselves. Asad, the more senior of the two, was born in 1900 in Austria. He studied History of Art at the University of Vienna, later proceeding to Berlin to pursue a career in journalism. Asad formally declared his Islam in 1926, to the imam of the mosque in Berlin, by which time he

had traveled extensively in Muslim lands. Izetbegovic was born near Sarajevo in 1925 and educated at the city's elite 'gymnasium' high school that included Ancient Greek in its syllabus. He had a crisis of faith as an adolescent: "I was still quite young when I freed myself from my parent's influence and began to live my life as I myself chose. Aged 15, I began to waver a little in my faith...the Communists were particularly strong in my high school...in communist propaganda God was on the side of injustice... it was very easy to fall for this line."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately his own good sense and involvement with the *Mladi Muslimani* (Young Muslims Association) drew him back: "So after a year or two of vacillation, my faith returned to me, but in a different fashion...it was no longer the merely the religion I had inherited: it was a newly adopted faith. I never lost it again".<sup>2</sup>

Asad participated in the Pakistan movement, also serving the country in an official capacity in its early years. He resigned from government service in 1954, and was acutely conscious that the Pakistan experiment had been disappointing. Yet when he came to write his commentary on the Qur'an, published in 1980, the socio-political message of Islam continued to shine through. The regret that he did express in later life was to do with lack of Muslim unity and intellectual independence: "there is no unanimity as to the kind of spiritual, social and – more than anything else – political future at which we ought to aim. To *desire* a return to an Islamic reality is one thing; but to *visualise* that reality in all its concrete aspects is another. Mere slogans will not help us in our dilemma..."<sup>3</sup>. He despaired too at the absence of serious, creative effort: "emotion *alone* will not bring us closer to our goal."

Izetbegovic too retained his Islamic values and the spirit of the *Miladi Muslimani* during the darkest days of the Bosnian crisis. Both men had enough time to recant and disown their earlier views had they chosen to do so – Asad passed

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<sup>1</sup> p. 13, 'Inescapable Questions – Autobiographical Notes' by Alija Izetbegovic, Islamic Foundation 2003

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> 'Author's Note', 'This Law of Ours', Dar al-Andalus, 1987

away in 1992 at the age of 91, and Izetbegovic in 2003, aged 78. Neither ever sought to distance themselves from the vision of Islam as a complete, holistic way of life, *deen wa dawla*.

A re-reading of their main tracts and pronouncements, juxtaposed against their life experiences, point to a number of stages:

- a stage of discovery and analysis. In Muhammad Asad's case this is represented by the classic essay 'Islam at the Crossroads' published in 1934. Asad was 34 at the time. The equivalent text in which Izetbegovic staked out his world view is the contemplative 'Islam between East and West'. Izetbegovic notes that "I had written it ...just before my imprisonment in 1946"<sup>4</sup> – so while still in his twenties. He further expanded the themes in articles for the yearbook of the Jamiat Ulama, *Taqvim*, under the pseudonym BSL (the initials of his children Leila, Sabina and Baqir) that were revised and compiled decades later into a single volume. Thus both 'Islam at the Crossroads' and the essays in 'Islam between East and West' may be taken as starting points that shaped their subsequent thought and action.
- a second stage of intense activism. In Asad's case this is highlighted in essays and speeches in the 1946-47 period in Pakistan, and for Izetbegovic in 'The Islamic Declaration' of 1970. Both men were then in their mid to late 40s.
- a third and final stage of reflection. It was during this period that Asad completed his commentary of the Qur'an, published in 1980. From 1990 onwards Izetbegovic was a national leader and his speeches and interviews provide the basis for assessing the links between his previous and present assertions.

There is a chronological sequence in these stages: youth, maturity and seniority.

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<sup>4</sup> p. 26, 'Inescapable Questions'

The lives of these two European Muslims are important in challenging various stereotypes, some harmless, others pernicious: that when Europeans turn to Islam it is to satisfy a spiritual yearning and little else; emphasis on the socio-political dimension of Islam is misreading and belittling religion; and finally, in the post 9/11 climate of the battle for hearts and minds, 'Islamists' are the dead-end products of an 'Eastern' mindset. Muhammad Asad and Alija Izetbegovic have left a corpus of writings and other published work spanning momentous periods of the twentieth century which remain instructive and inspiring. Their journeys, metaphorical and actual, thus have a contemporary relevance

### **The appeal of Islam in the West**

William Facey, writing on the life of Lady Zainab Evelyn Cobbold, an English aristocrat who embraced Islam around 1911 (and performed the Hajj in 1933), observes "for many British converts the attraction of Islam lay and still lies in its mystical dimension represented by Sufism. Such converts believe that all the great religions share a transcendent unity behind the superficial doctrinal detail that divides them.... However, there is little sign that Lady Evelyn was much aware of the public implications of her faith. It could be argued that in this sense she and others like her missed one of the essential aspects of being Muslim. In regarding Islam solely as a matter of private conviction and in subscribing to it entirely on her own terms, she followed a very European model of religious faith."<sup>5</sup>

This assessment does not do justice to the many European Muslims who deliberately sought out public expressions of their faith as community activists and organisers: Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, for example, was an outspoken advocate for the Ottoman cause before and after the Great War (1914-18) worked for a short period at the Islamic Information Bureau in London,

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<sup>5</sup> 'From Mayfair to Mecca', The Guardian 19<sup>th</sup> May 2008  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/19/frommayfairomecca> - reference is to 'Pilgrimage to Mecca' by Lady Evelyn Cobbold, with an introduction by William Facey & Miranda Taylor, Arabian Publishing Ltd, 2008

prior to taking up employment as editor of a Bombay newspaper; Lord Headley worked assiduously for the establishment of a mosque in London during the inter-war years, while his contemporaries Mrs Khalida Buchanan Smith and Khalid Sheldrake served as office-bearers of the British Muslim Society and Central Islamic Society respectively; Abdullah Philby took it on himself to prepare the state lunar calendars while residing in Saudi Arabia. The lives of Muhammad Asad and Aliya Izetbegovic provide outstanding European examples of Islamic political activism and leadership.

### **Religion and politics**

The Egyptian scholar and Al-Azhar graduate Ali Abd al-Raziq (died 1966) is often cited today for justifying the stand that Islam and politics occupy different realms<sup>6</sup>. Al-Raziq writes, “look between the two covers of the Qur’an for open or latent evidence supporting those who think that the Islamic religion has a political character, and then look for evidence, as hard as you can, among the *hadiths* of the Prophet, peace be upon him – those pure sources of religion which are within your hands, close to you. If you were to look in them for evidence or anything resembling it, you will find no proof, only guesses, and guessing does not replace Truth”.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, the contemporary London-based Sudanese author Abdelwahab El-Affendi argues that at the time of the Prophet, Medina was foremost a religious community and that the wrong lessons in polity have been drawn from that small city state<sup>8</sup>. The recent ‘Contextualising Islam in Britain’ report notes that “it is important to reclaim the notion of khilafah, which can be translated as both ‘vicegerency’ and ‘caliphate’. For most Muslims it means an Islamic state of government. But in classical Islamic theology, the word has never

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<sup>6</sup> Edinburgh University Press has recently republished his ‘Islam and the Foundations of Political Power’

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in ‘Liberal Islam – a source book’, Ed. by Charles Kurzman, OUP 1998

<sup>8</sup> Talk given at Mehfil Ali, London, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2009; El-Affendi’s book ‘Who needs an Islamic State?’ was first published in 1991 with a second edition appearing in 2008, published by Malaysia Think Tank London

meant statehood....an Islamic state is not necessary in order for Islam to thrive and be practiced".<sup>9</sup>

The advocacy of an Islamic socio-political order is also often considered opportunistic, seeking to 'instrumentalise' religion for ulterior ends. For example Hamid Algar is harsh about the revivalist Jamaluddin Afghani (died 1897) because of a "certain utilitarian attitude toward religion, conceived primarily, if not exclusively, as a social and political institution, and a willingness to make expedient appeal to religion for political purposes in the absence of personal belief".<sup>10</sup> Ali Allawi, the British-Iraqi statesman and author writes that "in many ways, political Islam is antithetical to the spiritualised individual."<sup>11</sup> Jason Burke describes Maudoodi, founding figure of the Jamaat Islami, as someone who "turned religion into an ideology of political struggle".<sup>12</sup>

Such views, particularly those emerging from within Islamic tradition are to be respected, but tempered with an awareness of alternative perspectives. There may well be multiple narratives embedded in readings of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Shah Waliullah unveiled his nuanced political theory of an exterior *khilafa* or political order, living alongside a hidden order of spiritual leadership. Hamid Algar's 'utilitarian' Jamaluddin Afghani was rated very differently by Muhammad Iqbal: the pan-Islamist was good enough to be given a role "as his mouthpiece in outlining the ideal Qur'anic state...the only religious reformer of modern time who had the capacity of rethinking the whole system of Islam without breaking with the past".<sup>13</sup> The *seerah* has been interpreted as the modus operandi of the Islamic movement in

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<sup>9</sup> The Cambridge project was funded by the Department of Communities & Local Government. The 82 page report is downloadable from <http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/CIBP.html>; the quote is from p.33

<sup>10</sup> Hamid Algar, 'Mirza Malkum Khan – biographical study in Iranian Modernism', University of California Press, 1973; the quote is from p.207

<sup>11</sup> Ali A. Alawi, 'The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation', Yale University Press, 2009; p.61

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in 'Rethinking Islamism', by Meghnad Desai, I B Taurus, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Aziz Ahmed, 'Afghani's Indian Contacts', Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol.89, No.3, 1969. It is interesting to note Iqbal's proviso on Afghani: 'if only his "indefatigable but divided energy" could have devoted itself exclusively to religious thought'.

books like Abdul Hameed Siddiqui's 'The Life of Muhammad', and the influential speeches of Professor Khurshid Ahmad to student audiences in the 1960s drawing a connection between present day struggles and the earliest days of Islam: "The Prophet, peace be upon him, comes to Medina, a new society is established and a new state. Now we have the realisation of that movement in the society as faith and civilisation. The force of evil challenged this centre of the Islamic movement and it retaliates with force."<sup>14</sup>

That Islam is both *deen wa dawla* is a well-established dictum and truism that has inspired generations the last fourteen centuries. The writings and actions of Asad and Izetbegovic however indicate that while there was undoubtedly a period of spiritual questioning and rebirth, this public dimension of Islam served as a foundation for their subsequent social and political engagement and activism. Involvement in politics in the spirit of Islam is not opportunism; Asad himself noted this hadith in one of his works: "Do not solicit an office of authority for if it is given to you for the asking, you will be left therein to your own resources, while if it is given to you without asking, you will be aided [by God] therein".<sup>15</sup>

### **Islamism – Eastern or Western?**

For the neo-con Zeyno Baran of the Hudson Institute, the 'Islamists' are aligned to ideas and actions alien to the 'West': "... Nor do they recognize that Islam can be limited to the religious realm, or to simply providing its followers with a code of moral and ethical principles. .. This Islamization of the individual leads that person to reject Western norms of pluralism, individual rights, and the secular rule of law.... Islamists are strenuously opposed to secular governance. Instead, they believe that Islamic rules and laws based upon the Quran and the *sharia* code must shape all aspects of human society, from politics and education to history, science, the arts, and more. Islamic jurisprudence developed and

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<sup>14</sup> Professor Khurshid Ahmad's talk at the FOSIS Annual Conference, published in The Muslim, London, July 1969, accessible at <http://www.salaam.co.uk/knowledge/tech.php>

<sup>15</sup> Asad's 'The Principles of State and Government in Islam', Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur; p.46

codified over the course of the 8th and 9th centuries and has not changed since then.”<sup>16</sup>

The British neo-con Michael Gove, a prominent politician close to David Cameron, similarly labours the point of Islamism’s non-European origins, adding his own demonic imagery: “the thinkers responsible for shaping Islamism as we now know it are the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood’s principal theoretician, Sayyid Qutb, and the Pakistani ideologue, Abul Ala Maudoodi. Together they exercise a bewitching, and guiding influence over the ranks of Islamist terrorists conducting jihad we face today”.<sup>17</sup>

The irony is that neither Asad nor Izetbegovic – prototype Islamists – were intellectually indebted to the Islamic movements of Egypt or Pakistan that took shape in the 50s and 60s. Their Islamism was an outcome of their own life experiences and reflection. If there was one influence – and this was shared by both men – it was of Sir Muhammad Iqbal, the poet-philosopher who died in 1938.

They were the products of the best educational system available in continental Europe. They were thoroughly familiar with Europe’s modern intellectual currents – from the Vienna Circle to Marxism. Apart from the History of Art, Asad also studied chemistry and physics with Schrödinger<sup>18</sup>. He captures the heady days in this account, “the stimulus of Freudian ideas was as intoxicating to my young mind as potent wine, and many were the evenings I spent in Vienna’s cafes listening to exciting discussions between some of the early pioneers of psychoanalysis, such as Alfred Adler...”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ‘The Muslim Brotherhood’s US network’ by Zeyno Baran, Hudson Institute, Feb 2008  
[http://www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.81/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.futureofmuslimworld.com/research/pubID.81/pub_detail.asp)

<sup>17</sup> Michael Gove, ‘Celsius 7/7’, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 2006; quote from p. 13

<sup>18</sup> ‘Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad’, book review by Murad Wilfried Hofmann, *The American Journal of Social Sciences* 19:3

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Road to Mecca’, Chapter ‘Beginning of the Road’



Izetbegovic was equally well-versed with what European intellectual life had to offer: “by the ages of 18 and 19, I was reading all the major works of European philosophy...the works that made a particular impression on me were Bergson’s ‘Creative Evolution’, Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ and Spengler’s two volume ‘Decline of the West’.”<sup>20</sup>

Neither needed guidance from father figures in the Orient for appreciating the moral message or arriving at their vision of a political Islam. They were Europeans fully competent to develop their own critiques and present Islam as the alternative, with all the socio-political implications entailed.

### **Asad’s spiritual core & ‘Islam at the Crossroads’**

Muhammad Asad was born Leopold Weiss, the son of a Jewish lawyer and the grandson of a rabbi. The family lived in a town which today lies in the Ukraine. Biographical accounts have appeared in a variety of publications that can be pieced together to understand Asad’s intellectual formation and his coming to Islam.

A contemporary English scholar, Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter) has described with great charm the entry into the fold of Islam with reference to his own odyssey: “...there was certainly an awareness that He was watching and waiting. And as months and years went by, I could not help but recognise the ‘conscious’ nature of the Absolute, as I played chess with Him. I would advance an argument, and He would show me an answer. All events acquired a religious meaning, as I entered what the Sufis call the ‘hidden game’.”<sup>21</sup> Asad’s entry into *dar ul-Islam* was a similar combination of spiritual experiences and mystic yearning

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Inescapable Questions’, p.14

<sup>21</sup> ‘Quicunque Vult, or, A teenage journey to Islam’ by Abdal-Hakim Murad  
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/Quicunque-Vult-or-A-teenage-journey-to-Islam.htm>

In the foreword to 'Islam at the Crossroads' Asad writes, "After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things: of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings, of our strengths and our weaknesses. So it was in my case. Islam came over to me like a robber who enters a house by night; but unlike a robber, it entered to remain for good".

In 'The Road to Mecca', Asad provides the following autobiographical note:

"One day—it was in September 1926—Elsa [his wife, whom he had married the previous year] and I found ourselves traveling in the Berlin subway. It was an upper-class compartment. My eye fell casually on a well-dressed man opposite me, apparently a well-to-do-businessman...Most of the people were now well dressed and well fed, and the man opposite me was therefore no exception.... And then I began to look around at all other faces in the compartment—faces belonging without exception to well-dressed, well-fed people: and in almost every one of them I could discern an expression of hidden suffering, so hidden that the owner of the face seemed to be quite unaware of it. The impression was so strong that I mentioned it to Elsa...When we returned home, I happened to glance at my desk on which lay open a copy of the Koran I had been reading earlier. Mechanically, I picked the book up to put it away, but just as I was about to close it, my eyes fell on the open page before me, and I read:

*You are obsessed by greed for more and more  
Until you go down to your graves.  
Nay, but you will come to know!*

...For a moment I was speechless. I think that the book shook in my hands. Then I handed it to Elsa. 'Read this. Is it not an answer to what we saw in the subway?'

It was an answer so decisive that all doubt was suddenly at an end. I knew now, beyond any doubt, that it was a God-inspired book I was holding in my hand: for although it had been placed before man over thirteen centuries ago, it clearly anticipated something that could have become true only in this complicated, mechanized, phantom-ridden age of ours... such a man could not by himself have foreseen the torment so peculiar to this twentieth century. Out of the Koran spoke a voice greater than the voice of Muhammad...."<sup>22</sup>

Asad forthwith located the imam of the Islamic mission in Berlin and declared his *shahadah*<sup>23</sup>. Ismail Ibrahim Nawwab, a writer on Asad, describes this episode as a “spiritual, electrifying epiphany – reminiscent of the experience of some of the earliest Muslims”.<sup>24</sup>

In another account, Asad refers to a dream, in which “I was crossing the desert on the back of a camel, when a man came to me; he was in his forties, clad in an *abaya* with short sleeves. He said to me: ‘Follow this path.’ Carrying on my way I approached a huge gate from which shone a dazzling light. After a while of hesitation, I decided to pass the gate with vivid emotion. A blinding clarity took me and I knew that I had just crossed the bridge. When I told a sheikh about this dream, he said to me: ‘the man is no one else but Mohamed the prophet, and he brought to you the revelation. “<sup>25</sup>

These are hardly the thoughts and actions of a man who could in later life seek to ‘instrumentalise’ Islam. If he did seek out its socio-political dimension then clearly this would be a view well-grounded in spiritual insights.

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<sup>22</sup> ‘The Road to Mecca’, Chapter ‘Dajjal’

<sup>23</sup> At the Ahmedia Mission, supervised by Maulana Sadruddin

<http://ahmadiyya.org/WordPress/2008/10/19/life-of-muhammad-asad/>

Apparently he was named ‘Asad’ (Arabic ‘lion’) as a translation of ‘Leo’ in Leopold Weiss, his name at birth

<sup>24</sup> ‘A Matter of Love: Muhammad Asad and Islam’ in *Islamic Studies* Vol. 39, No. 2 (2000)

<sup>25</sup> *D'une foi l'autre: Les conversions À l'Islam en Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), by Lisbeth Rocher and Fatima Cherqaoui, p.195-196

A year later, now aged 27, Asad set off for Arabia to perform the Hajj. Chance and circumstance then drew him into the court of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. He left Arabia in 1932. The trail can then be picked up in the foreword to 'Road to Mecca':

"I went to India and met the great Muslim poet-philosopher and spiritual father of the Pakistan idea, Muhammad Iqbal. It was he who soon persuaded me to give up my plans of traveling to East Turkestan, China and Indonesia and to remain in India to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state which was then hardly more than a dream in Iqbal's visionary mind".<sup>26</sup>

### **Asad's 'Islam at the Crossroads'**

In March 1934, at the age of 34, Asad published 'Islam at the Crossroads', a book that sought to analyse the prevailing malaise and challenge the dominant ideologies of the West:

"the average occidental – be he a Democrat or a Fascist, a Capitalist or a Communist, a manual worker or an intellectual – knows only one positive 'religion', and that is the worship of material progress...the temples of this 'religion' are the gigantic factories, cinemas, chemical laboratories, dance-halls, hydroelectric works: and its priests are bankers, engineers, film stars, captains of industry, record sportsmen. The unavoidable result of this craving for power and pleasure is the creation of hostile groups armed to the teeth and determined to destroy each other whenever and wherever their respective interests clash...the only conclusion is that a civilization of this kind must be a deadly poison for any culture based on religious values. Our original question, whether it is possible to adapt the Islamic way of thinking and living to the exigencies of Western civilization, must be answered in the negative".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 'Road to Mecca', 'The story within the story'

<sup>27</sup> 'Islam at the Crossroads', chapter 'The Spirit of the West'

It is a measure of Asad's vision that he could foresee a world war to come. For El-Affendi, 'Islam at the Crossroads' "offers an uncompromising criticism of Western modernity and its materialism and warns Muslims against following its footsteps."<sup>28</sup> The text also provides indications of the author extending his appreciation of Islam beyond matters of spiritual solace:

"From the viewpoint of the historical observer, the strong, one-sided influence which Western civilization exerts on the Muslim world – whether admitted or not admitted by the Muslims themselves – is not at all surprising, because it is the outcome of a long historical process for which there are several analogies elsewhere. But whereas the historian, being concerned with observation only, may be satisfied, for us Muslims the problem remains unsettled. For us who are not mere interested spectators, but very real actors in this drama – for us who regard ourselves as the followers of the Prophet Muhammad – the problem really *begins* here. We believe that Islam, unlike other religions, is not only a spiritual attitude of mind, adjustable to different cultural settings, but a self-sufficing orbit of culture and a social system of clearly defined features".<sup>29</sup>

Asad's challenge to the West and his trajectory towards the socio-political dimension of Islam owes more to his insights as an intellectual who has recognized the bareness of his own European heartland and less to the influence of the neo-cons' much demonized Islamic movements of the Muslim world. Murad Hoffman notes that the book is "a monumental historical, intellectual, and sociological critique of Christianity and the Occident as a whole. It can be considered to be the first almost total rejection of Europe and Western ideology. This was followed up by writers such as Sayyid Qutb..."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge: Religious reform and the burden of the Western Muslim intellectual', p.19-50, Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review 8 (2009); quote from p.28

<sup>29</sup> 'Islam at the Crossroads' foreword

<sup>30</sup> Islamic Studies, Vol.39, No. 2 (2000) p.238

Maulana Maudoodi, three years younger than Asad, was to bide his time till 1938 before finding an opportunity to institutionalize his particular vision of Muslim revival. This was achieved via the establishment of what we would today call a policy institute – the ‘Darul Islam Trust’ in Pathankot. Its articles of association listed two *maulanas* on its membership roll of seven - “Maulana Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss) journalist of Model Town, Lahore’ and ‘Maulana Syed Abul ‘Ala Sahib Maudoodi journalist of Kucha Pandit, Delhi; editor ‘Tarjuman al Qur’an’, Lahore”.<sup>31</sup>

What were the ‘Crossroads’ alluded to in the title of ‘Islam at the Crossroads’? Asad writes, “the problem facing Muslims today is the problem of the traveler who has come to a crossroads. He can remain standing where he is; but this could mean death by starvation. He can choose the other road bearing the sign ‘Towards Western Civilisation’; but then he would have to say goodbye to his past for ever. Or he can choose the other road, the one over which is written: ‘Towards the Reality of Islam’. It is the road alone which can appeal to those who believe in their past and in the possibility of its transformation into a living future”.<sup>32</sup>

Between 1935 and 1938 Muhammad Asad worked on a translation into English of the *hadith* compilation of Imam Bukhari. He published five volumes of an intended forty volume project but then the Second World War intervened. He found himself placed under internment in India. Being an Austrian citizen, with the German occupation of Austria in 1938, Asad automatically become a German citizen. His period of internment lasted six years. He later observed, “the English accused me, as a confidant of Ibn Saud, of obtaining the oil concession for the Americans and not the English. It was all madness”.<sup>33</sup> Asad’s father and his own sister were deported from Vienna by the Nazis and died in a concentration camp.

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<sup>31</sup> Tazkira Maudoodi, Volume 1, insert between pages 712 and 713; Darul Maarif Islami, Mansura, Lahore,

<sup>32</sup> closing paragraph of chapter ‘About Imitation’, ‘Islam at the Crossroads’

<sup>33</sup> Islamic Studies 37:4 (1998) op.cit

It is an irony that while his family was imprisoned by the Nazis, he was imprisoned by the enemies of the Nazis.

### **The intellectual powerhouse of ‘Mladi Musulmani’**

By the time Asad was released from his internment, Alija Izetbegovic was preparing for his.

Izetbegovic’s formative period was in the ranks and reading circles of the *Mladi Musulmani*. This was an initiative of a group of Bosnian Muslim students at the University of Belgrade in 1941, and included a branch for women. This Young Muslims Association (YMA) established contact with other indigenous Muslims – the Bosniaks - at Sarejovo’s First Gymnasium where Alija Izetbegovic was a pupil. The young men and women questioned their quietist ulema and looked in hope towards a different future. According to Izetbegovic, “they outlined some new ideas that were more in line with what I wanted to hear about my religion...it was Islam and two points of reference of oppositional nature – anti-fascism and anti-communism – that determined the general focus of the Young Muslim movement”.<sup>34</sup> The youngsters took deliberate steps to learn other European languages and “Muhammad Asad’s writings in German on Islam and the political situation of the Muslim world were collectively read at meetings...Izetbegovic himself gained fluency not only in German but also French and English.”<sup>35</sup>

When Yugoslavia was occupied by the German army in April 1941 and the monarchy was replaced by a fascist Croatian republic, the Association’s members did not enroll into the pro-German Ustashe Movement. They were prevented from registering as an association. Just as in the case of Asad, the YMA were disturbed by the totalitarianisms emerging from Europe’s bosom and began searching for an answer in a third way – that of Islam. The mood was

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Inescapable Questions’, p.16-17

<sup>35</sup> ‘Izetbegovic, man of insight and inspiration’, Muslim News, London; 24<sup>th</sup> September 1993; the article by the author was based on an interview with the Bosnian historian Prof Fikret Karcic.

captured in an article published in 1942 by a member of the Association: “Islam was not only a religion but also a universal ideology which included social affairs and matters of state”.<sup>36</sup> Izetbegovic’s continued involvement in this movement under Tito’s communist regime led to his arrest in 1946, but it seems that prior to this he already had a manuscript of ‘Islam between East and West’<sup>37</sup>.

It contains passages that are so reminiscent of Asad’s ‘Islam at the Crossroads’ – evidence of the lasting effect of *Mladi Muslimani*’s reading circles. Both texts start with philosophical and conceptual proclamations:

“Without religion and the concept of man’s ever-striving spirit, as stated in the ‘prologue in heaven’, there is no authentic belief of man as the highest value [*the author’s reference is to the primordial covenant ‘alastu bi rabbikum...’ Quran 7:172*]. Without it, there is no belief that man is man is at all possible and that he really exists. Atheistic humanism is a contradiction because if there is no God, then there is no man either [*Izetbegovic then provides a footnote referring to the Qur’an 90:8-17 quoting it in full “Verily, We have created man in toil and struggle....have We not made for him a pair of eyes? And a tongue and a pair of lips? And shown him the two highways...”*]

.... ‘Man is a product of his environment’ – this basic postulate of materialism served as the starting point of all subsequent inhuman theories in law and sociology, and of the practice of manipulating human beings, which in our time reached monstrous proportions during the time of Nazism and Stalinism. All other similar seductive theories of society’s priorities over individuals, of man’s obligation to serve society, belong here as well. Man must not serve

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<sup>36</sup> from ‘Al-Hidaya’, journal of the Jamiat Ulama; detail provided to the author by Dr Fikret Karcic in an interview published in The Muslim News, London, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1993. The ‘Al-Hidaya’ article was anonymous, written by ‘a young Muslim student of medicine’.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Inescapable Questions’, p. 26; Izetbegovic also states that he revised it subsequently



anybody; he must not be a means. Everything must serve man, and man must serve God only. This is the ultimate meaning of humanism”.<sup>38</sup>

Munir Gaavrankapetovic, one of the *Mladi Muslimani* leaders arrested and tortured in 1949 confirms this contemplative and analytical ethos: “we had no intention of taking political power. What we discussed in our programs centred around the study of the Qur’an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad...the basis of the movement was to instill in Muslims a social and moral accountability that was in danger of becoming instinct”.<sup>39</sup>

An eloquent passage in ‘Islam between East and West’ declares that “Islam does not get its name from its laws, orders, or prohibitions, nor from the efforts of the body and soul it claims, but from something that encompasses and surmounts all that; from a moment of cognition, from the strength of the soul to face the times, from the readiness to endure everything that an existence can offer, from the truth of submission to God. Submission to God, thy name is Islam.”<sup>40</sup>

In another significant passage that contains hints of the direction he is heading, Izetbegovic wrote “Islam knows no specifically ‘religious’ literature in the European sense of the word, just as it knows no pure secular literature. Every Islamic thinker is a theologian, just as every true Islamic movement is also a political movement”<sup>41</sup>.

Both Asad’s ‘Islam at the Crossroads’ and Izetbegovic’s ‘Islam between East and West’ were grounded in an appreciation of the moral and ethical values of Islam. But importantly, both texts contained hints it could be the viable alternative to the dominant world views and ideologies of their times. They reveal the authors’

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<sup>38</sup> pp. 39-40, ‘Islam between East and West’, Chapter 1 ‘Creation and Evolution’; the quotes are from the (second) edition published by American Trust Publications, 1989

<sup>39</sup> Interview by Faizal Dawjee, published in *Al Hayat*, London, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1993

<sup>40</sup> p.293, *Islam between East and West*, American Trust Publications, 1989 edition

<sup>41</sup> p.196, Chapter 7 ‘Moses-Jesus-Muhammad’, *ibid.*

engagement with the idea of Islam not just as spiritual solace and moral teachings, but also as potential societal organizing principles.

How come this convergence in approach by two men emerging from the European intellectual heartlands? Firstly, there was a commonality of experience – Asad's essay 'Islam at the Crossroads' was written when almost the whole of the Muslim world was colonised, and the Spanish were bombing the Riff in Morocco. Izetbegovic's work was drafted under the shadow of a totalitarian regime that crushed any opposition – he was himself arrested in 1946 and spent three years in prison. Next there could have been the inspiration from Muhammad Iqbal's poetry of revival and resistance: Nicholson's translation of *Asrar e Khudi* had been available in English available since 1915, and Arberry had rendered *Zabur-i Ajam* in 1927. The convergence in their approaches could also reflect their similar readings of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, so that they were alert to an underlying message to struggle against oppression and establish justice. Finally in writing 'Islam at the Crossroads' and 'Islam between East and West' both Asad and Izetbgovic were in the same phase of their life cycle, that of discovery and analysis.

Their thoughts on the political implications of their world-view had yet to be spelled out. This would happen in next phase of direct action, community involvement and institutional development.

### **From reflection to action - Asad**

After his release from internment in August 1945, Asad started editing a magazine 'Arafat- A Monthly Critique of Muslim Thought'. He was deeply immersed in the Pakistan movement, and used 'Arafat' to clarify "the great confusion prevailing in the Muslim community as to the scope and the practical implications of Islamic Law"<sup>42</sup>. Once the new Muslim homeland was launched, he made a series of seven radio broadcasts in 1947, 'Calling all Muslims'. He

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<sup>42</sup> 'Author's Note', 'This Law of Ours', Dar Al Andalus 1987

was also appointed 'Director of Islamic Reconstruction' in Lahore, and published his essay 'Islamic Constitution-Making in 1948.

Izetbegovic was 23 when he was released from prison in 1949. The remaining members of *Mladi Muslimani*, those who had not been shot, regrouped and restarted their discussion circles unbeknown to the authorities. Izetbegovic was asked to write for their magazine *Mudzahid*. He enrolled at the University of Sarajevo, initially in Agronomy and subsequently Law, graduating in 1956. He also started working in a hydroelectric company, becoming head of an engineering site. He later served as a legal adviser. Izetbegovic has not left a rich corpus like Asad, but nonetheless there is the forthright 'Islamic Declaration' of 1970.

Both men were now well-seasoned and mature at these junctures – Asad in his mid-forties and Izetbegovic in his late forties. Their explicit and clear expectations for an Islamic socio-political order were forged while both were immersed in the crucible of struggle – it was theory informed by the challenges of the hour. But what was the religious rationale that inspired them to seek out such Islamic activism? Or, as Asad himself asked, "Does Islam really expect Muslims to strive, at all times and under all circumstances, for the establishment of an Islamic state – or is the desire based solely on their historical memories?"<sup>43</sup>

Asad commences his nuanced argument with an account of the shariah: "from the viewpoint of the believer, the Qur'an and the Sunnah reveal to us a conceptually understandable segment of God's all-embracing plan of creation. With reference to man, they contain the only available positive indication of what God wants us to be and to do".<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> p.2, 'State and Government in Islam', Dar Al-Andalus, 1980; Asad notes that this book is a development on the ideas first elaborated in 'Islamic Constitution-Making'

<sup>44</sup> p. 3, *ibid*.

Asad next elaborates on individual and collective responsibility:” We may, if we so desire, willingly submit to His revealed Law and thus, as it were cooperate with Him; and we may, if we choose, go against Him, disregard His Law, and risk the consequences. However we decide, the responsibility is ours. It goes without saying that our ability to lead an Islamic life depends on our making the former choice. Nevertheless, even if we choose to obey God, we may not always do it fully: for although it is obvious that the innermost purpose of Islamic Law is man’s righteousness in the individual sense, it is equally obvious that a good deal of the Law can become effective only through a consciously coordinated effort of many individuals – that is through a communal effort.”<sup>45</sup>

The final stage in the argument is the case for an Islamic governance or system: “From this it follows that an individual, however well-intentioned he may be, cannot possibly mould his private existence in accordance with the demands of Islam unless and until the society around him agrees to subject its practical affairs to the pattern visualised by Islam. So conscious a cooperation cannot arise out of a mere *feeling* of brotherhood: the concept of brotherhood must be translated into positive social action – the “enjoining of what is right and forbidding of what is wrong” (*al-amr bi’l-ma’ruf wa ‘n-nahy al-mukar*) – or, to phrase it differently, the creation and maintenance of such social conditions as would enable the greatest possible number of human beings to live in harmony, freedom, and dignity”.<sup>46</sup>

It is a nuanced argument because it respects personal piety and also imposes a condition of collective agreement, rather than enforcement, for the establishment of an Islamic order. Asad clarifies what he means by the Law in this context: “All Arab philologists agree that the *nass* of the Qur’an denotes the ordinances [*ahkam*] forthcoming from the self-evident [*zahir*] wording in which they are expressed...This shariah concerns itself exclusively with what the Law Giver has

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p 4

ordained in unmistakable terms as an obligation or put out of bounds as unlawful; whereas the far larger area of things and activities which the Law Giver has left unspecified – neither enjoining nor forbidding them in *nass* terms – must be regarded as allowable (*mubah*) from the *shar'i* point of view”.

Asad quotes the Qur'an

لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا

For very one of you we have ordained a Divine Law and an open road

And cleverly links ‘open road’ with the scope of *ijtihadi* legislation: “thus while the Divine Law (the shariah) outlines the area within which Muslim life may develop, the Law-Giver has conceded to us, within this area, an ‘open road’ (*minhaj*) for temporal legislation which would cover the contingencies deliberately left untouched by the *nusus* of Qur'an and Sunnah”.<sup>47</sup>

Asad also cites the Qur'anic ordinance

وَأْمُرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ

Their [the Believers] communal business [amr] is to be [transacted in] consultation among themselves

describing it as “the fundamental operative clause of all Islamic thought relating to statecraft.....[that] makes the transaction of all political business not only consequent upon, but synonymous with, consultation: which means the legislative powers of the state must be vested in an assembly chosen by the community specifically for this purpose”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> p.15 ibid

<sup>48</sup> p.45 ibid

Asad's ideas were not emerging in a vacuum, but in the very real debates in 1947 as Pakistan was born and there was a decisive struggle on its rationale. In an article in the magazine *Arafat* written three months prior to Partition, he observed that "the foremost slogan of the Pakistan movement is *la ilaha ill 'Allah'*", but he feared for the attitude of the intelligentsia. Asad hoped that the Islamic vision would gain the upper hand, but he knew too, in May 1947, that "To put it bluntly, many of our brothers and sisters do not seem to care for the spiritual, *Islamic* objectives of Pakistan..."<sup>49</sup>

Asad's radio broadcasts in the early months of Pakistan clearly express his conception of what an Islamic state would be in the middle of the twentieth century: "the ultimate goal behind our demand for an independent Pakistan was the building of a free society in accordance with our own concepts of life and of social behaviour. We – the Muslims of Pakistan – had a definite vision before us: the vision of an equitable society ruled by the principles of Islam, in which all men and women of goodwill, whatever their creed or race, might find all the justice and well-being that is possible of attainment on earth. It is for this that the Muslims have suffered and struggled for years; and it is for this that they were prepared to undergo man more sufferings".<sup>50</sup>

In 1947 Asad could not foresee the next stages in the history of Pakistan, but whatever would happen later, he was setting out clearly the vision of an Islamic polity.

### **From reflection to action - Izetbegovic**

This too became a preoccupation of Alija Izetbegovic and the outcome was 'The Islamic Declaration', as inspiring a document today as it was then. The Declaration was subtitled 'A programme for the Islamization of Muslims and the Muslim peoples'. Its reference to the Tunisian dictator Habib Bourguiba and his

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<sup>49</sup> p.72, 'What do we mean by Pakistan' in 'This Law of ours and other essays', Dar Al-Andalus, 1987

<sup>50</sup> p.92, 'Calling all Muslims', op.cit.

mockery of Ramadan, and also to “the lessons from twenty years of Pakistan’s experience” suggests that the Declaration was largely written in the late 1960s. Though it made no reference to Yugoslavia, it was seen as a seditious tract and he was arrested in a clampdown on dissidents in 1983 and accused of being “obsessed with the idea of an Islamic renaissance and the Islamisation of Muslims”.<sup>51</sup>

Izetbegovic’s earlier work, ‘Islam between East and West’ was academic and measured; in ‘The Islamic Declaration’ the ideas are carried through to their logical conclusion, and there is also a sense of urgency. He writes, “Islam and its deep-rooted precepts on man’s place in the world, the purpose of human life, the relationship between God and man and between man and man, remains a lasting and irreplaceable ethical, philosophical, ideological and political foundation for every authentic action towards renewal and improvement of the state of the Muslim peoples. The alternative is stark: either a move towards Islamic renewal, or passivity and stagnation. For the Muslim peoples, there is no third possibility”.<sup>52</sup> Izetbegovic’s formula for renewal was Islam’s political message.

The Declaration states,

“there is only one possible way out: the formation and grouping of a new intelligentsia which thinks and feels Islam. This intelligentsia would then fly the flag of the Islamic order and, together with the Muslim masses, take action to bring it about...the Islamic order posits two fundamental assumptions: an Islamic society and Islamic governance. The first is the matter and the second the form of the Islamic order. An Islamic society without an Islamic authority is incomplete and without power; Islamic governance without an Islamic society is either utopia or violence”.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> p. 32, ‘Inescapable Questions’

<sup>52</sup> p. 7, The Islamic Declaration; downloaded from <http://www.angelfire.com/dc/mbooks/Alija-Izetbegovic-Islamic-Declaration-1990-Azam-dot-com.pdf#> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> November 2008]

<sup>53</sup> p.25-26, ‘Inescapable Questions’, op.cit

There are extraordinary parallels between sentiments in Izetbegovic's Declaration and Muhammad Asad's views cited earlier from the 1947 period. Izetbegovic writes:

“Generally speaking, a Muslim does not exist as a sole individual. If he wishes to live and survive as a Muslim, he must create an environment, a community, a system. He must change the world or submit himself to change. History has no instance of any truly Islamic movement which was not at the same time a political movement. This is because Islam is a religion, but it is at the same time a philosophy, a moral system, an order, a style, an atmosphere – in a word, an integrated way of life”.<sup>54</sup>

Izetbegovic also shares Asad's expectation for Muslims to be creative in this endeavour:

“There are immutable Islamic principles which define the relationship between man and man, and between man and community, but there are no fixed Islamic economic, social or political structures which have been handed down once and for all. Islamic sources contain no description of such a system. The way in which Muslims will carry on an economy, organise society and rule in the future will therefore differ from the way in which they carried on an economy, organised society or ruled in the past. Every age and each generation has the task of finding new ways and means of implementing the basic messages of Islam, which are unchanging and eternal, in a world which is not eternal and subject to constant change. Our generation must accept that risk and make the attempt”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> p.26 op.cit

<sup>55</sup> p.32 op.cit



References to the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet are woven through Izetbegovic's narrative. Just as Asad would expand the scope of some key Qur'anic term and vest it with a societal significance, so does Izetbegovic:

“Muslims are brethren” (Qur'an 49:10). In this message, the Qur'an points to the goal, which because of its distance, provides a source of inspiration for a constant surge forwards. Enormous changes must take place within people and without, in order to reduce the distance on the road to the brotherhood so proclaimed.

In this principle, we see both the authorisation and obligation of the Islamic community to establish appropriate institutions and undertake specific measures, so that the relationship between Muslims and real life may assimilate an increasing number of the elements and features of brotherhood. The number and kind of measures, initiatives and laws, which a truly Islamic administration could introduce by referring to the principle of brotherhood of all Muslims is practically unlimited”.<sup>56</sup>

Izetbegovic is also at one with Asad in his conception of an Islamic order as a society reflecting popular will within a moral framework. The section in 'The Islamic Declaration' with the heading 'Islam and independence' notes,

“There is no Islamic order without independence and freedom, and vice versa: there is no independence and freedom without Islam. The latter has a double sense: first, independence is real and lasting only as the result of winning spiritual and ideological independence and if it is a sign that a people has found itself, discovered its internal strength without which the independence it has gained cannot be meaningful or long-lasting...these facts determine the character of the Islamic order as a democracy, not a democracy in form, but as reality as a consensus of opinion. This kind of democracy exists only

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<sup>56</sup> p.35, op.cit

where the government turns ideas and action into what people feel, where it acts as a direct expression of their will. The establishment of an Islamic order is in fact a supreme act of democracy because it means the realisation of the deepest inclinations of the Muslim peoples and the ordinary man...”<sup>57</sup>

“Any movement, therefore, which has the Islamic order as its main objective, must above all be a moral movement. It must arouse people in the moral sense and represent a moral function which uplifts and makes people better. This is the difference between an Islamic movement and a political party, which may represent unity of thought and interest, but does not include an ethical standard or involve people morally....the Qur’an says that interior rebirth is a prerequisite of any change or improvement in the state of a people (Qur’an 13:12)”.<sup>58</sup>

The Declaration draws to an end with a poignant section on ‘Pakistan – an Islamic Republic’ that seems to carry on from where Asad left of:

“...We applaud Pakistan, regardless of certain failings and difficulties because it is the outcome of this desire to establish an Islamic order and because those who conceived it and brought it about were clearly led by an Islamic idea. Pakistan is the dress rehearsal for the introduction of an Islamic order under modern conditions and at present rates of development....the lessons from twenty years of Pakistan’s existence ....have a bitter taste. We still believe in Pakistan and its mission in the service of international Islam. There is no Muslim heart which will not bound at the mention of something as dear to us as Pakistan even if this love, like any other, knows fear and trembling. Pakistan is our great hope, full of trials and temptations.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> p.44-45, op.cit

<sup>58</sup> p.54, op.cit

<sup>59</sup> p.59-60, op cit

Izetbegovic was sentenced in 1983 for the 'Declaration' which, according to the Yugoslav public prosecutor, was "an attack upon the values of our social order. In it there lie abstract danger, written and verbal delict, the consciousness of counter-revolutionary activities..."<sup>60</sup> It was a show trial and the public were only permitted to attend the first day. Witnesses on that occasion said that Izetbegovic spoke in his own defense, accepting authorship of the Declaration. He argued that his writings had been about Muslims in general and it was up to Muslims in a Muslim-majority country to decide whether they wished to live in an Islamic state or not, and western powers "must not interfere in their choice".<sup>61</sup> He added "Islamic revolution will start as a cultural revolution but cannot finish without political change. Together with twelve colleagues he was sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment. With the unraveling of the Communist regime, Izetbegovic was released in 1988. In May 1990, along with many colleagues who had shared his two spells in prison, he formed the 'Party of Democratic Action' (SDA) to face the secessionist challenges from Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. The SDA tried to preserve the idea of a multiethnic and democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina. The attempts of the Bosnian Serbs to join the Republic of Serbia and form a Greater Serbia eventually led to the onset of war in spring 1992.

Asad, after leaving Pakistan in 1954 wrote his famous 'Road to Mecca' and then embarked on his great work on the Qur'an. He dropped out of political engagement, living initially in Tangiers, then Portugal and finally Spain. Asad participated in conferences organised by the Islamic Conference of Europe in the late 1980s and it is said that President Zia ul Haq invited him back to Pakistan, but the offer was not taken up. He was apparently "appalled" by the ordinances relating to women and the law of evidence and the Zina Ordinance<sup>62</sup>. He is buried in the Muslim cemetery in Granada. On 14 April 2008 a square in Vienna

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<sup>60</sup> p.43, Inescapable Questions

<sup>61</sup> M A Sherif, 'Izetbegovic, man of insight and inspiration', The Muslim News, 24 September 1993; based on an interview with Dr Fikret Karcic, 1993.

<sup>62</sup> 'Muhammad Asad: the road beyond Mecca' by Khaled Ahmed, The Friday Times, Pakistan, 2002

outside the UN headquarters was officially named the "Muhammad-Asad-Platz" in his honour.

### **True to their life projects**

How far did Asad and Izetbegovic's convictions stand the test of time? In Asad's case, did he repudiate the ideas he expounded in the 1947 after seeing what happened in Pakistan in 1971 - the separation of East Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh? Could he still believe in the applicability of Islam to statecraft and governance, or in shaping social life, after this experience? Would Izetbegovic's idealism and humanism stand up to harsh realities of betrayals and Machiavellian politics once he emerged from prison in the 1990s?

The fact is that neither man repudiated or disassociated themselves from their earlier views. In Asad's case, one need only look at his commentary on the Qur'an, published in full in 1980, for confirmation. Similarly, Izetbegovic's interviews and speeches indicate his continuing commitment to Islamic social values. Asad's unchanging ideals, notwithstanding the disappointment of the Pakistan experience, can be noted from his commentary notes. Four examples are noted below:

- from Surah An-Nisa, the verse

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ  
النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ نِعِمَّا يَعِظُكُمْ بِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ  
سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا

Behold, God bids you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with unto those who are entitled thereto, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice.

Verily, most excellent is what God exhorts you to do: verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing!<sup>63</sup>

Asad observes that the Qur'anic phrase "to judge with justice" has wider applicability: "that is, from its being applied to any material object or moral responsibility which may have been entrusted to a believer – and, in particular, to the exercise of worldly power and political sovereignty by the Muslim community or a Muslim state, to which the next verse refers".<sup>64</sup>

This next verse is as follows:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي  
الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِن تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ  
إِن كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

O you who have attained to faith! Pay heed unto God, and pay heed unto the Apostle and unto those from among you who have been entrusted with authority; and if you are at variance over any matter, refer it unto God and the Apostle, if you [truly] believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best [for you], and best in the end.<sup>65</sup>

Asad then elaborates in his commentary notes, "the above passage lays down a fundamental role of conduct for the individual believer as well as the conceptual basis for the conduct of the Islamic state. Political power is held in trust (*amanah*) from God; and His will, as manifested in the ordinances comprising the Law of Islam, is the real source of all sovereignty. The stress, in this context, "on those from *among* you who have been entrusted with

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<sup>63</sup> An Nisa, 4:58

<sup>64</sup> Commentary note 75, 4:58

<sup>65</sup> An Nisa, 4:59

authority” makes it clear that the holders of authority (ulu l-am) in an Islamic state must be Muslim”.<sup>66</sup>

- In Surah Al ‘Imran, the verse

فِيمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لَئِن لَّنتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ  
لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ  
فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ  
الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ

And it was by God's grace that thou [O Prophet] didst deal gently with thy followers: for if thou hadst been harsh and hard of heart, they would indeed have broken away from thee. Pardon them, then, and pray that they be forgiven. And take counsel with them in all matters of public concern; then, when thou hast decided upon a course of action, place thy trust in God: for, verily, God loves those who place their trust in Him.<sup>67</sup>

Asad states that “this injunction, implying government by consent and council, must be regarded as one of the fundamental clauses of all Qur’anic legislation relating to statecraft...all authorities agree in that the above ordinance, although addressed in the first instance to the Prophet, is binding on all Muslims for all times”.<sup>68</sup>

- On these verses in Surah Alaq

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَى

Hast thou ever considered him who tries to prevent

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<sup>66</sup> Commentary note 78, 4:59

<sup>67</sup> Al ‘Imran 3:159

<sup>68</sup> Commentary note 122, 3:159

## عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّى

a servant [of God] from praying?<sup>69</sup>

Asad observes, “there is no doubt that the purport of the above passage goes far beyond any historical incident or situation inasmuch as it applies to all attempts, at all times, to deny to religion (symbolised in the term ‘praying’) its legitimate function in the shaping of social life – attempts made either in the conviction that religion is every individual’s ‘private affair’ and, therefore must not be allowed to ‘intrude’ into the realm of social considerations...”<sup>70</sup>

- In the verse in Surah An-Nur

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَإِذَا كَانُوا مَعَهُ  
عَلَىٰ أَمْرٍ جَامِعٍ لَّمْ يَذْهَبُوا حَتَّىٰ يَسْتَأْذِنُوهُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ  
يَسْتَأْذِنُونَكَ

[True] believers are only they who have attained to faith in God and His Apostle, and who, whenever they are [engaged] with him upon a matter of concern to the whole community do not depart [from whatever has been decided upon] unless they have sought [and obtained] his leave. <sup>71</sup>

Asad’s alert political antennae ingeniously draws this lesson: “In a logical development of this principle [of seeking the Prophet’s permission, for valid reasons, from participating in a course of action or policy agreed upon by the majority of the community] we arrive at something like the concept of a ‘loyal opposition’, which implies the possibility of dissent on a particular point of

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<sup>69</sup> Al-Alaq 96:9-10

<sup>70</sup> Commentary note 5, 96:10

<sup>71</sup> An-Nur, 24:62 (part of verse0)

communal or state policy combined with absolute loyalty to the common cause”.<sup>72</sup>

Asad’s disappointments in the state of affairs in the Muslim world come through in various parts of the commentary, as for example his despair that religion plays a “largely formalistic role” resulting in “cultural sterility”.<sup>73</sup> He also maintained a critical distance from the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.<sup>74</sup> However his faith in Islam as a basis for a socio-political order remained undiminished. In the Preface to his book ‘The Principles of State and Government in Islam’ published in 1980 he argues that “the very fact that none of the existing Muslim countries has so far achieved a form of government that could be termed Islamic makes a continuation of the discussion imperative – at least to people to whom Islam represents the dominant reality in their lives. This book is an attempt to keep that discussion alive.”<sup>75</sup> Among his last public engagements was a lecture in London organised by the Islamic Council of Europe. Asad concluded his address with this quote from the Qur’an: “Thus We have willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you”.<sup>76</sup> His equally distinguished son, the social anthropologist Professor Talal Asad states that his father maintained his optimism to the end.<sup>77</sup>

Izetbegovic’s attitudes can be pieced together from his interviews and speeches once he was released from prison in 1989. He states that even while in prison, he had started thinking about the experiences of the *Mladi Muslimani* and the need for a political party: “when I decided to found this party, I conceived it as different from the YMO [*Mladi Muslimani*], so that it would be able to withstand

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<sup>72</sup> Commentary note 89, 24:62

<sup>73</sup> Commentary note 13, 46:11

<sup>74</sup> Lisbeth Rocher and Fatima Cherqaoui in their ‘D’une foi l’autre: Les conversions a l’Islam en Occident’, Paris: Seuil, 1986, state that Asad said, “Khomeini is worst than the shah and has nothing in common with Islam”, p.64

<sup>75</sup> Preface to ‘The Principles of State and Government in Islam’, Dar Al-Andalus, 1980

<sup>76</sup> Qur’an 2:143

<sup>77</sup> quoted by Amir Ben-David, op. cit



the trials that, with time, it would have to face...I saw it as a Muslim party. I was sure that it would have no difficulty in bringing together the Muslim peoples in Yugoslavia....”<sup>78</sup>

Work for establishing the Party for Democratic Action (SDA) began in November 1989. One challenge it faced was from “some of those Muslims [who] regard themselves as Serbs or Croats ... they wait for Muslims to declare themselves as Serbs or Croats, but the Muslims don’t want to do that and remain uncommitted”.<sup>79</sup> Another challenge was from those who “wanted to eliminate the Muslim and emphasis only the national, Bosniac nature of the Party”.<sup>80</sup>

When Izetbegovic addressed the SDA in May 1990 he observed, “I began my speech at the Constituent Assembly with the *bismillah*. I did so for two reasons: first, I was quite sincerely appealing to the Almighty for help, and second, it was a mark of religious freedom and a clear signal of disobedience to the regime. Until that time it was unimaginable to utter any kind of religious phrase in a public platform”.<sup>81</sup> Izetbegovic went on to become the first president of the SDA.

Izetbegovic navigated the SDA through its contemporary political setting. Its manifesto made reference to the “powerful moral potential of religious teachings”, and called for fundamental reforms in human rights, education, the economic system, appointment of the judiciary and preservation of the environment. It stated, “the SDA accords particular significance to the preservation of the moral and ethical values of the family, as the most important factor in the upbringing of the individual and the creation of social cohesion within every community”.<sup>82</sup> It also noted, “the SDA will [therefore] revive the national consciousness of the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina and insist on respect for the fact of their national identity, with all the legal and political consequences this entails”.<sup>83</sup> His

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<sup>78</sup> p.64, Inescapable Questions

<sup>79</sup> Interview in Impact International, 12-25 January 1990

<sup>80</sup> The reference is to Adil Zulfikarpasic, p. 75, Inescapable Questions

<sup>81</sup> p.55, *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> p.72, *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> p.68-69, *ibid.*

slogan was 'Muslims should be re-Islamised', but that would only be possible in a gradual manner<sup>84</sup>. The spirit of the Islamic Declaration, with its emphasis on moral character and social and economic justice lived on.

The unilateral declaration of independence by Croatia and Slovenia in June 1991 and Milosevic's dreams of a Greater Serbia led inexorably to the Balkan wars from 1992-1996. These were dark days for the Bosnian Muslims: "we did not only have Chetniks in our necks, but also some people from the international community with their strange and unintelligible aversion". An example would be the scheming of David Owen, serving as an 'international mediator', yet encouraging Fikret Abdic in the Bihac enclave to challenge Izetbegovic's leadership and fragment the Bosnian war effort.<sup>85</sup> For the French officers in UNPROFOR, the Bosniaks were 'les indigènes' – the derogatory term French soldiers used in Algeria when fighting the FLN - while for the British commanders, they were 'the wogs'<sup>86</sup>. but even then, Izetbegovic retained a moral compass. In a speech to the General Staff of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in December 1993, he declared

"When you leave here, it will be to tell the soldiers certain things. Tell them they must not persecute the weak. Ensure the people have no fear of this army...Passions are running high, terrible things have been committed on all sides...You see, God has presented us with a painful challenge. We have been slaughtered, our women and children murdered, our mosques destroyed, but we shall not kill women and children, we shall not destroy churches. We shall not do so, because this is not our way, although it has happened in isolated cases. There are combatants here too, and I take this opportunity to tell them – and this is a message that should be passed on to everyone here and elsewhere – that we shall be victorious because we

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<sup>84</sup> interview with Dr Fikret Karcic, op.cit.

<sup>85</sup> Noel Malcolm, 'David Owen and his Balkan bungling', <http://www.barnsdle.demon.co.uk/bosnia/owen.html>

<sup>86</sup> Brendan Sims, 'Unfinished hour – Britain and the destruction of Bosnia', Alan Lane 2001

respect others' religions, and others' nations, and other political convictions, and because we strive to be decent people even in our difficult situation..."<sup>87</sup>

The Dayton negotiations were impositions, and in self-criticism he observed, "my problem was that I could neither win a satisfactory peace nor lead a satisfactory war. Negotiations were held in conditions of blackmail and with a Damocles sword over Bosnia's head. People, attacked, outnumbered and out armed, were subject to terrible sufferings, and the offered peace was opposed not only to my principles, but to elementary justice as well. I could hardly accept such a peace, and it was even harder to go back home carrying a message of the war's continuation. I felt crucified".<sup>88</sup>

However, he did have to go back to his people with an unsatisfactory agreement:

"and with God's will, peace awaits us. Not immediately, but soon. Our Prophet, upon his return from a hard battle, said that he was going from a small battle to a large one, meaning the battle of peace...I forget the number, but I remember being horrified when a woman...told me how many orphans they look after now. And then, of course, there are inevitable matters of justice and injustice. So may God be with us".<sup>89</sup>

Izetbegovic throughout stood true to the message of the Islamic Declaration that emphasised moral character. How far would a period of peace and stability have allowed him to proceed with its programme of brotherhood and an Islamic polity? In 1997 Izetbegovic addressed the OIC Summit in Tehran, where he did not shy from mentioning some home truths on the problems in the Muslim world, but he also added: "Islam is the best – this is the truth – but we are not the best. Those two are different things and we always switch between them...With the help of religion and science, we can create the power that we need. It is a long and hard

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<sup>87</sup> p.173, Inescapable Questions, op.cit.

<sup>88</sup> p. 290, ibid

<sup>89</sup> p.338, ibid

road, it is an exhausting climb up the hill, the hill that the Qur'an talks about, but there is no other way".<sup>90</sup>

In the same OIC address, Izetbegovic did not balk from addressing the issue of terrorism, describing it as "a consequence of our present and of our future weakness. It is not only immoral, but it is unproductive as well. Immoral because innocent people are hurting and unproductive because it has never solved anything. All serious political movements in history rejected terrorism."<sup>91</sup>

Interestingly, there is also a full circle. In a speech in Riyadh at the end of 1997 he referred to his recent re-reading of Muhammad Asad's 'Islam at the Crossroads':

"Muslim wise men are warning of the so-called children's disease of copying Western culture. Asad even dared to say that the harmful consequences of this copying are much greater than the material advantage that it could give Muslims! It is impossible to copy a civilisation in its external dimension without at the same time being under the influence of the spirit that produced that civilisation....absorbing this spirit creates an inferiority complex in young generations of Muslims, which includes rejection of their own culture....Didn't the Qur'an call upon us to 'Strive to achieve the virtue of deeds'? (Qur'an 5:48). But we can strive only when we strengthen the consciousness of our identity. Conscious Muslims are ready to give and receive, without throwing their authentic values into oblivion...And the strong nations are those who, holding onto moral principles, remain true to themselves and open up to the world in the most difficult circumstances".<sup>92</sup>

Asad and Izetbegovic were not naive about the state of Muslims or the Muslim world, but to the end their message was one of moral, social and political

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<sup>90</sup> p.390, ibid

<sup>91</sup> p.391, ibid

<sup>92</sup> p.507-598, ibid

responsibility. Both were great twentieth century Muslim personalities, who were men of thought as well of action, who did not lose their long-held vision of Islam as an overarching message for all aspects of life.

Then, as now, assertions of Muslim independence and autonomy remain unpalatable to the hegemonic forces of the day. Lord Mountbatten viewed Jinnah as “humourless” and “psychopathic”<sup>93</sup>; in a similar vein, forty five years or so later, Lord Carrington, the former British Foreign Secretary and NATO Secretary General, would refer to Izetbegovic as that “dreadful little man”<sup>94</sup>. The neo-con Martin Kramer has deprecated Asad as the “wandering Muslim” who “adhered to a set of ideals that suffused the Jewish milieu from which he emerged”.<sup>95</sup> These hostilities are not to be taken lightly: “the nature of an Islamic political order, especially if it materialises in a number of countries, would be a matter of great concern to the world’s other powers.”<sup>96</sup>

Whether Iqbal or Jinnah, Maudoodi or Qutb, Asad or Izetbegovic, their memories and achievements should be honoured. It is important to remember Khomeini’s observation that ‘Islam is the religion of militant individuals who are committed to truth and justice’. Those who seek to instruct us on who is, or is not, worthy of respect are in effect appropriating our right to critique and assess own history. The Muslim champions should inspire our next generation of leaders to hold fast to a vision of a political project grounded in the spirit of Islam, for even according to a critic of the track record of recent Islamic movements, “the demand for an Islamic state is fundamental to the future of Islam and the appropriate government for Muslims”.<sup>97</sup>

*(c) M A Sherif*

*updated January 2010*

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<sup>93</sup> Stanley Wolpert, ‘Shameful Flight – the last years of the British Empire in India’, Oxford, 2006; p.10

<sup>94</sup> Brendan Simms, ‘Unfinest Hour – Britain and the destruction of Bosnia’, op.cit.

<sup>95</sup> [http://sandbox.blog-city.com/the\\_road\\_from\\_mecca\\_muhammad\\_asad\\_born\\_leopold\\_weiss.htm](http://sandbox.blog-city.com/the_road_from_mecca_muhammad_asad_born_leopold_weiss.htm)

<sup>96</sup> p.172, Allawi, op.cit.

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