

Coexistence with Islamic Fundamentalism?¹

by George Katsiaficas

To my great fortune, I am not now in the US. I am fortunate not because I fear anthrax or other terrors but rather because my mind and soul are not being inalterably stamped by the patriotic media onslaught and chauvinism swirling through the country with greater strength than a tornado. During the last such nationalistic maelstrom (the Iran hostage crisis in 1979) I was also lucky enough to have been living abroad. I mention my location because my perspective—worlds apart from the vast majority of Americans—will probably seem quite un-American.

In South Korea, emergent grassroots viewpoints bear little resemblance to those in the US. The 20th Century was singularly brutal here, beginning with an unspeakably harsh Japanese occupation and colonization, through the bloody suppression of post-World War 2 anti-US uprisings and the subsequent annihilation of millions of people and destruction of nearly the entire peninsula's infrastructure during the Korea War. The frozen state of war since 1953 continues to abet dictatorial tendencies in both Koreas. Through decades of tremendous sacrifices and heroic struggles, the South Korean people won the beginnings of liberty, a semblance of democracy and enough wealth to become consumers. Through it all US corporations have profited enormously.

When the heartland of America was hit on September 11, many here—including those normally sympathetic to the US—secretly celebrated and privately expressed satisfaction that a country which has inflicted so much pain has come to experience that which it has so painlessly exported. Universally hated and reviled in the US, Osama Bin Laden is for many Koreans a 21st Century Che Guevara, admired for his personal sacrifice, for his dedication to the downtrodden, and for his ability to cross national boundaries to fight for his ideals. As long as Bin Laden evades capture and escapes death, he makes the world's sole superpower appear weak. Seoul school children are reported to sing songs praising him, with elementary, middle and high school students each having made up their own lyrics and melodies.

As the US prepares to take its next steps in the war on “terror,” Koreans should be quite concerned. It appears that North Korea might become one of the next targets. In 11

¹ This is an expanded version of a talk given at Sungkonghoe University in Seoul, South Korea on November 29, 2001.

months, the Bush administration has yet to have any serious talks with the North, thereby effectively scuttling Kim Dae-Jung's sunshine policy. Recently, North Korea was named by the US as one of the producers of weapons of mass destruction, and some Congressional Republicans called on Bush to take a firm hand with Iraq and North Korea. Opinion polls show 78% of Americans favor war with Iraq.² On November 25, the Sunday *New York Times* featured a story entitled "After the Taliban, Who? Don't Forget North Korea."

The Bush administration has a unique window of opportunity to have its way with the world. Not one government outside Iraq (as far as I know) opposed the war in Afghanistan. While the German government, Kofi Annan and others are against escalation of the war to Iraq, I suspect they would fall in line if the US acted unilaterally. For 11 years, the US and Britain have steadily bombed Iraq, and if their coming escalation brings a quick and easy victory, Bush and Co. would be so headstrong that taking on North Korea would not be inconceivable. Russia and China might acquiesce, particularly since they would probably be left untouched while Japan and South Korea (China's main regional competitors) would probably be largely destroyed—and have to be rebuilt. Since 1929, war has been the primary solution to stagnation in the world economy. Currently, the US has over 250,000 troops in 141 countries. With the high tech sector appearing to have run its course for now and the airlines industry contracting, what avenue besides war is there for renewed growth?

The US could have responded to September 11 in a manner quite different than it has. Why not withdraw troops from Saudi Arabia and compel the creation of a Palestinian state? Neither of these measures would create any great hardship for the US. Could it be that the US economy, dependent more than ever on war for its health, demands military action? Or is it a form of military madness? I am reminded of the Sean Connery movie, *The Rock*. Taking over Alcatraz island, a group of army officers aims weapons of mass destruction at San Francisco, demanding \$100 million for the destitute families of servicemen who sacrificed their lives in secret wars. Despite the real threat that millions of people might be killed, the authorities never even discuss paying the \$100 million (a paltry sum). In the current crisis, it similarly appears the US government has not considered fundamentalists' grievances—despite the very real dangers faced by people all over the world.

² Richard Morin and Claudia Dean, "Most in US Back Terror Steps," *International Herald Tribune* (November 28, 2001) p.1

While the need for constraining the US military has seldom been so necessary, much of the world peace movement supported the war against the Taliban. The German Greens, whose founding principle is pacifism, have served a key role in legitimating the US war (to say nothing of the first foreign deployment of German combat troops since Hitler). Historical parallels can be found in the German Social Democrats support of the Kaiser in World War I and in the French Communist Party's support for the war in Algeria. In the US, many progressives mirror the Bush administration's comparison of the Taliban and the Nazis, a mistaken analysis that makes any offensive action seem proper. Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University, widely respected for his condemnation of the Vietnam War based on principles of international law, called the war in Afghanistan "the first truly just war since World War II." A recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* quoted a centrist Democrat as saying it "astonishing how little anti-war agitation there has been on the left" in the US.³ Even those few professors who publicly advocated peace soon after September 11 were accused of being unpatriotic by Lynne Cheney (the Vice-President's wife who is herself a powerful conservative voice since being head of the National Endowment of the Humanities during the first Bush administration).⁴

Watching students in Kwangju march against the war, I lamented the US peace movement's paltry efficacy, its failure of insight and inability to affect peoples' consciousness. It appears that the US government will be free to channel America's vast resources into a long war. Watching the BBC world news (CNN is not part of my cable package), I marvel at the sophisticated pageantry of the falsely elected American president. George Bush is the son of a former president who is now a business associate of the Bin Laden family and was then affiliated with Contra cocaine dealers, and the grandson of industrialists who were highly placed Nazi collaborators. Yet he portrays himself as the champion of human rights and individual liberty as he bombs already devastated Afghanistan further into the Stone Age.

Although Tony Blair served as point man in the disinformation campaign about mushrooming Taliban heroin production in their final days as government, the UN reported that it plummeted last year by as much as 90%. Poppy flowers, however, were

³ Dan Balz, "War Dissent? Don't Look on the (Hawkish) Left," *International Herald Tribune* (November 27, 2001) p. 3.

⁴ Cheney's report is available at <http://www.goacta.org/Reports/defciv.pdf>.

recently reported to have proliferated in Uzbekistan, and have been seen being planted in Afghanistan—after the US-backed Northern Alliance won battlefield victories. Surfing the web, I've followed with dismay the recent expansion of Southern Air Transport, Evergreen and other CIA-owned or related airlines in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Not coincidentally, Richard Secord (chief operative in support of the Indochinese heroin Mafia during the Vietnam War and cover man for Contra cocaine dealers in the 1980s) has been reported recently to have twice visited there.

If US progressives are to have any chance of intervening in the current constellation of forces, to change the direction of the world's great powers currently lined up for a long-term war on Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism, we first need to rethink radically our perspectives and values. The American movement's anguished expressions of sorrow and condemnation of a "crime against humanity" after September 11—and silence or muted criticism of civilian casualties caused by US bombing in Afghanistan or Israeli F-16s in Gaza City—are indications of how the entire country marches in lock-step to the tunes played by a propaganda system that values some lives above others. Anti-Semitism continues in the media stereotypes and public hatred, not of Jewish bankers and communists as with the Nazis, but of Arab oil sheiks and "terrorists." The US public passively accepts the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children from our blockade and cheers its renewal.⁵ Although many progressives express regret, it is nowhere near the intensity of their emotions after the killing of less than 1% as many human beings in New York. Even in death, people remain loyal to superiority of the American way of life—no matter what the cost to the rest of humanity. As for the wretched of the earth, if their anti-imperialist movements do not accept our values, our notions of feminism and gay liberation, of "democratic" elections and individual "freedom," then to hell with them—no solidarity, no sympathy and certainly no legitimacy.

In the case of Islamic fundamentalism,⁶ nearly all Western commentators view it as

⁵ In 1996, after five years of sanctions, CBS reporter Lesley Stahl asked US Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeline Albright, the question: "We have heard that a half million children have died (as a consequence of our policy against Iraq). Is the price worth it?" Albright's response: "We think the price is worth it."

⁶ This term is subject to many interpretations. I use it to refer to those for whom truth and justice can be found only through a strict reading of the Koran and its literal application to everyday life. There are many kinds of Islamic fundamentalists, the Saudi Wahhabi and contemporary Taliban being but two examples. Like Christians, most of the

purely reactionary—as a misguided response to American cultural imperialism and military intervention. Such a view denies Islamic fundamentalism agency in its own right. Once again it is we who are the creators and they the mud we mold. Scarcely anyone has even bothered to glance at Islam’s history or to undertake a cursory glimpse of its philosophy. If they did, they would immediately see that unlike the Torah or the Bible, the entire Koran is thought to be the word of God, not of mere men. I mention this not to privilege one religion above another but to indicate an autonomous motivation for Islamic fundamentalism. For those fundamentalists who take their holy book literally, god’s commandments about everyday life are loud and clear. As far back as the 12th Century—during the time Averroes was writing and the West was in a backward state—Islamic fundamentalism reared its head. How then can it be reduced to a response to Western modernization?

Nowhere in our universe of discourse is recognition of the piety and dignity of millions of Moslem fundamentalists. They are a minority of Moslems, and their recent destruction of Buddhist statues, like the Taliban/Saudi treatment of women, are actions that I detest. Nonetheless, I simply cannot devalue their lives and disregard their struggles. I value life—all life—a value trampled upon by nearly all the world’s organized religions with respect to non-believers. For that reason (and others) religious states for me are inherently problematic. No doubt many people will find it difficult to regard Islamic fundamentalism as having any positive attributes. That is all the more reason why peaceful coexistence is vitally needed.

Thanks to the internet, I’ve been able to tune in to many American Leftists’ thinking since September 11. In almost all cases, intolerance and black/white categories animate discussion of the “enemy.” Writing in *The Nation* on November 5, Katha Pollitt observed that unlike the Vietnam War, “This time, our own country has been attacked, and the enemies are deranged fanatics.” On October 14, *Nation* editor and *LA Weekly* columnist Marc Cooper called them “atavistic, religious fascists whose world view is diametrically opposed to all humanitarian and progressive morality.” Another respected commentator (whom I shall not name because her comments were circulated on a private listserve) maintained that fundamentalism’s “doctrine of intolerance simply cannot stand in contemporary society if we are to evolve towards peace and

world’s Moslems are not fundamentalists, but Islamic fundamentalists today control many governments, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Sudan.

cooperation.” Intolerance of intolerance?

These examples flow from an inability to respect difference and a notion that there is only one just way of life. If the Left continues to impose a monocentric notion of justice, a concept most articulately expressed in the work of Jurgen Habermas and noted feminist theorist Seyla Benhabib, peace will never be realized. Alternative views can be found coming from Nelson Mandela, who endorsed limited autonomy for white homelands, and Fred Hampton (leader of the Black Panthers murdered by the FBI and Chicago police in 1969) who insisted that white power should belong to white people.⁷ To appreciate the Eurocentric content of many Leftists’ perspective on Islamic fundamentalism, consider for a moment the case of Poland’s Solidarity movement. Despite Solidarity’s patriarchy and religious conservatism, much of the Left fawningly celebrated it because it fit the working-class definition of a revolutionary subject. Daniel Singer carefully documented these backward dimensions of Solidarity in his book on that subject, and he warned us not to judge social movements from our own values but within the context of their concrete existence.

Before the collapse of the French empire, two disastrous defeats in colonial wars, one in Vietnam and the other in Algeria, ended French dreams of global glory (and inflicted millions of deaths upon indigenous peoples). US imperial ambitions have already cost the lives of over 2 million Indochinese. As in Vietnam, the US may win nearly every battle in its war with Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism (the 1991 Gulf War, deposing the Taliban and current attempts to kill Osama Bin Laden) but there is little doubt in my mind that the US will never win this war. Moslems fought for centuries to liberate Crusader-held lands, especially Jerusalem (third holiest site for Islam where few Moslems are now permitted). Does anyone realistically expect them to persevere any less in the face of contemporary Western penetration of Islamic holy sites? With the bottomless pit of its war against Islamic fundamentalism and Arab nationalism, the American empire’s aura of military invincibility will be shattered. Assuming the accuracy of the above observation, two large questions emerge: As *pax Americana* declines, what will be the nature of the subsequent global order? What will become of Israel?

Within the context of current power relations—i.e. concentration of military might in

⁷ For a fuller critique of Benhabib’s concept of justice, see my book *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Humanities Press, 1997) pp. 265-274.

nation-states—optimists posit a United Nations controlled global military to insure justice and protect the powerless as an alternative to (or in spite of) US military hegemony. While a single world military would unquestionably represent a giant step from militarized nation-states, saving humanity untold trillions of dollars in war-related expenditures and sparing incalculable suffering inflicted daily by militaries the world over, the idea of a UN-controlled world military raises several dilemmas. The most pressing is: Who would control it?

If we ourselves a brief moment of utopian speculation (today more difficult than ever in the aftermath of the carnage of September 11 and the new war) few people would disagree with the desirability of the *complete abolition of weapons of mass destruction*—not just nuclear, chemical and biological weapons but also so-called conventional ones like fighter jets, bombers, landmines and artillery. If it is to be strategic, the peace movement that is now only beginning should be directed toward the abolition of militaries, not their reform. In a world where even peaceful means of transportation are turned into weapons of mass destruction, nearly everyone would consider such a proposition foolish, but with major weapons systems in the hands of governments, how else can the powerless fight back? Only through the universalization of non-military conflict resolution will humanity's future fate improve beyond our abysmal reality. Of course, the destruction of the world's militaries would undoubtedly send the global economic system into a disastrous depression—all the more reason for us to discuss it as part of the need for a completely different world system (or anti-system).

Since the Holocaust, the safety of Jews remains of great concern to any consideration of global justice. As the US empire declines, Israel's security is certain to suffer, possibly to the point where a Jewish state ceases to be a realistic option—even with the use of Israel's nuclear arsenal. As history's ironic dialectic turns victors into vanquished, every Palestinian death, each missile fired at defenseless Arabs and Afghans only further diminishes the security of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. With the growing weakness of the Zionist project, what fate will befall Israel's millions of Jews?

Islam's historic toleration of the Jewish religion contrasts quite favorably with centuries of the West's pogroms and bigotry that culminated in the Nazi Holocaust. Witness the fate of the Jews of Cordoba, respected and celebrated by Moslems for their libraries and learning, but tortured and expelled after the Spanish conquest in 1492. If history teaches

us anything, Jews would enjoy far more rights and privileges within an Islamic framework than anything ever known in European history before World War 2. Far from resonating with Islam's history, contemporary hatred of Jews in the Islamic world should be understood as its very Westernization—not as a reaction to the West's “superior” values.

Those who doubt the accuracy of this understanding of the past or question its validity for the future would especially agree that measures should now be undertaken to protect Jews living in Israel. What better proposal than the free emigration of Jews to lands of their choice--most importantly to the USA? (Lest we forget, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Zionist and US officials arranged for treaties compelling Russian Jews to go to Israel, no matter how many family members they had elsewhere and regardless of refugees' free choice.) Israelis who choose to remain in the Holy Land could, in the best of times, help create a multi-religious society within the framework of a federation of communities or secular state in which all people could enjoy lives freed from militarized enforcement of superior rights by any one group.

The preceding discussion, while to me to be a sober and realistic assessment of the long wave of historical developments, will no doubt seem unrealistic to many people. Few people would disagree, however, that US foreign policy needs reevaluation.

In this context, activists in Korea can play a vital role. A non-Islamic country with a citizenry that is deeply concerned about war, Korea can have a voice that speaks to governments and activists all over the world. If people here were to mount significant protests against the real possibility of the US war against terror being expanded, governments would take note and activists in the US and Europe would be affected—maybe even inspired to act. Asian activists would be even more impacted.

Two examples from the 1980s will help clarify my thinking.

1. In building the movement for democracy here in the 1980s, leaders sought to find ways to unite people in the struggle—and the answer was to call for direct presidential elections. In June 1987, after hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets for 19 consecutive days, that demand was realized. Movements for democracy soon blossomed in many Asian countries: Burma 1988, China 1989, Nepal 1990, Thailand 1992. These revolts were related to each other and today are all treated as forms of “people power,” a

term coined in the Filipino revolution of 1986, itself inspired by the Kwangju Uprising of 1980.

2. In the early 1980s, when the US and USSR stationed intermediate range Pershing and SS-20 nuclear missiles in Europe, a massive peace movement suddenly appeared. Millions of people took to the streets in London, Rome, Paris and Bonn. The new missile deployment meant that the US and USSR could fight a “limited” nuclear war in Europe without Russia or the US being directly attacked. The European peace movement helped end the Cold War. The emergence of the Green Party in Germany and the presence of so many demonstrators helped Gorbachev convince Russian generals that Western Europe would not attack them—giving the USSR the space to change peacefully, let go of its East European buffer states and end the arms race.

Today, a similar situation exists in Northeast Asia, where it is possible a regional war could be waged without directly affecting the US. Without a visible peace movement here, US political leaders will feel free to expand their war on “terror” to North Korea. They have launched trial balloons in the form of the above mentioned *New York Times* article and other pronouncements by American leaders. If there is no protest from Koreans, the US will take it as a sign of approval. As in Afghanistan, they may choose to have a “limited” war in which Koreans fight Koreans. Minimal US casualties would surely make such a war more palatable to the American public. Here is one pragmatic reason why keeping US troops in Korea may actually serve as a deterrent to war.⁸ So long as the US exercises operational command over the South Korean armed forces, however, the outbreak of war is made more likely. I know of no other country that permits its military to be governed by a foreign power. Demanding Korean control of its military is not only reasonable, it could also unite nearly all Koreans—including military leaders. Such a demand would encourage North Korean leaders to reengage the South in dialogue as well as sending a signal to the US that war in Korea is unacceptable.

East Asia’s importance as a market for military goods has been increasing dramatically. After the end of the Cold War, when demand for such products decreased in North America, Western Europe, the former Soviet Union and former Soviet-bloc countries, arms suppliers looked to other markets. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies: “Between 1990 and 1997, East Asia’s share of global defence imports

by value almost tripled, from 11.4% to 31.7%. In 1988, only 10% of US arms exports went to the region. By 1997, this had increased to 25%.⁹ Within East Asia, South Korea's share of military spending in 1997 (\$14.8 billion) was nearly as large as the combined total spending of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.¹⁰ Even if the US does not attack North Korea, the need for a peace movement is strongly indicated by these numbers. As in the 1980s, the more recent Filipino example of expelling the US from its huge base at Subic Bay may be an important trendsetter for Asian anti-militarism movements today.

Strategic social movements need to inject long-term ideas into moments of crisis. Necessary for the health of the existing world system, militarism is a scourge that squanders humanity's vast resources and threatens to destroy our hard-won accomplishments. That is one reason why, along with a call for an end to US command of the South Korean military, the movement here should demand a ban on weapons of mass destruction.

Koreans have a vital interest in peace, and they need to act resolutely now if they are to continue to maintain it in the future.

⁸ Paik Nak-chung first brought this insight to my attention.

⁹ Tim Huxley and Susan Willett, *Arming East Asia* (International Institute for Strategic Studies/Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.