

THE CRESCENT IN THE EAST

Islam in Asia Major

Edited by

RAPHAEL ISRAELI

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INTRODUCTION

Raphael Israeli

I

In recent years Islam has become the object of a renewed world-wide interest. Yet, most of the uninitiated observers are inclined to oversimplify the phenomenon of Islam and identify it with oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Libya, and more recently with the revolutionary turmoil which has swept Iran. Few of them realize that although the political, spiritual and now economic core of Islam has been geographically located in the Middle East, the large masses of the Believers dwell further to the East in Asia, and constitute, by the sheer weight of their numbers, the numerical heartland of Islam. This raises, of course, a big question mark on the applicability of the concept of centre and periphery in the Islamic world. In any case, it is thanks to these huge agglomerations of followers of Muhammad that many a Muslim ruler can boast about the '700 million Muslims' of his constituency.

Boasting apart, a contention of this sort suggests an underlying sentiment of unity. Indeed, the ideal of a one and united universal Islamic *umma* has survived the political discords, not to say enmities, which have often torn the Islamic world. The ideal of unity has been fed by the concept of universal kingship, inasmuch as until modern times, every Muslim ruler considered himself the ruler of all Muslims, not only of the territory of his realm. Moreover, unlike the Western notions of race, nationality and statehood, Islam has always regarded the Faith as the prime criterion of identity. Thus, the world is not divided up between nations, according to this view, but between Muslims on the one hand, and all the rest on the other hand.

The unity of Islam is not manifested only in matters of ritual (the Five Pillars, the centrality of the Arabic language, the Holy Scripture, and the like), but also in a spiritual yearning for an organic oneness. Whenever a movement of reform or a convulsion of resentment shake one part of the Muslim world, the tremor is bound to be sensed in all other parts. And since Islam is a totalistic doctrine which knows no differentiating between the religious and the temporal, religiosity by necessity reflects upon politics. Hence the Pan-Islamic movements which have swept now and then the Islamic world, the most recent manifestation of which has been, of course, the institution of the Islamic Conferences. However, this unity, which is shared by Believers from Morocco to Indonesia, belies fundamental cleavages between the various countries where Islam has taken roots. African Islam is vastly different from Asian Islam, and even within the continent of Asia, the observer cannot help notice the immense gaps separating the Islam of South Asia from, say the

Islam of China. The diversity of local cultures by necessity generated a wide gamut of Islamic nuances across the Asian continent. Yet, all these varieties can be identified as specifically Islamic. The umbrella of unity is provided by the *'ulamā* who undergo the same rigorous training throughout the Islamic world and by the universality of the *shari'a*, the Holy Law of Islam, which prescribes the normative rules of the Faith.

The *'Āda* (local custom), by contrast, reflects the extent to which normative Islam was eroded in the process of compromising with the native cultures. Local customs in different Muslim lands lend the dimension of diversity to this huge body of Islam.

In addition to the immense scope of diversity we find in Asian Islam another major cleavage between Muslim-ruled and Muslim-minority countries. The problems in each of these categories are, expectedly, reflective of the modalities that Islam has worked out in each particular culture. Muslim countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia, handle their Islam with a high-handed assurance, and a self-confidence that we can hardly find in a country like Malaysia, where Muslim rule is constantly harassed and challenged by the large non-Muslim population, or Afghanistan, where the pro-Marxist regime finds itself at odds with the Islam-imbued masses of the people. Still worse is the situation in the countries where Islam is a minority: India, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, the Philippines and China.

II

The present book conveniently starts with the most troublesome areas of contemporary Islam, which also happen to be located at the western most end of Asia: Iran and Afghanistan. Amnon Netzer traces the background and current significance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while Jamil Hanifi draws the wide panorama of Afghani-Islamic groups and their struggle against the present Soviet-backed Marxist regime in Kabul.

Peter Hardy's article which follows, reflects much of the *problematique* of Islam in Asia as it is manifested in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of India, Muslim rule was supreme during the Mughal Empire, but Islam has now become a minority faith after the first partition which created Pakistan. The second partition, and the creation of Bangladesh, has further brought into focus some of the problems of Islamic existence and factionalism in Asia. Some of these themes are further explored, from a socio-political angle, in Asaf Hussein's contribution which follows. The picture of South-Asian Islam is completed by Marc Gaborieau's analysis of how a Muslim minority in remote, isolated, and land-locked Nepal fares in a predominantly Hindu environment.

Further to the East, but still within the Indian-Muslim cultural world, lie the Muslims of Burma. Like its Nepalese counterpart, the Burmese Muslim community may be considered to a great extent a branch of the Indian Muslim community. Moshe Yegar's article surveys the historical development of this community and offers an

explanation for the unrest which has plagued this Muslim minority in modern Burma. As we move to Southeast Asia, we enter the realm of the Malay culture. Again, like in the case of the Indian sub-continent, an overview of the Malay Muslims of Malaysia and Thailand by Ronald Provencher precedes a more detailed analysis of the predicament of the Thai Muslim community, by Ladd Thomas. It is interesting to note in this context, that some non-Malayan Muslims (Chinese and others) form a part of this fascinating mosaic of ethnic groups. Then comes Indonesia, the most Muslim-populated country in the world. Soebardi and Woodcroft-Lee give us the broad socio-cultural and political outlines of this breathtakingly varied people which nevertheless are fused together into one nation thanks to the cementing cohesion of Islam.

Peter Gowing's discussion of Filipino Muslims tosses us into a different kind of Islam: the only Muslim minority in Asia living under (though not submitting to) the rule of a Christian state. With outside assistance from Libya and possibly other Arab countries, and encouraged by international Muslim forums such as the Islamic Conferences, the Moros of Mindanao have been struggling for actual independence. The prospects for a settlement appear to be rather grim, since the Manila government seems adamant to preserve what it regards as national unity, but the Moros are as determined to win an autonomy as the only way to ensure their freedom. At hand is perhaps one of those seemingly insoluble conflicts which only time can cure.

And finally - the Chinese Muslim community, which is possibly the sixth largest in the world (after Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Soviet Union). Moreover, the 30-odd million Muslims are not made of one ethnic group. There are Chinese Muslims in the major cities of China proper, whose appearance can hardly be distinguished from other Chinese; these are the descendants of the first settlers who date back to the eighth century. And there are Turkic-Muslims in Central Asia who have always dwelt in the periphery of the Middle Kingdom. Unrest has characterized both groups since the nineteenth century, and even under the fanatically unitarian regime of the People's Republic many of them continue to harbour hopes for autonomy, if not complete secession. The contribution on Chinese Islam explores the confrontation between Islam and the Chinese communist state, and speculates about future developments.

III

The reader will find this broad spectrum of Islamic manifestations within varying cultural contexts both fascinating and puzzling. Can all these multifarious expressions of faith earn the one and same label of Islam? What do an Iranian, a Malay, a Thai, a Chinese and an Arab have in common? Is it possible that a religion, which is at the same time a holistic culture and way of life, maintain a fibre of unity that links so many diverse cultural groups?

Startling as this may seem, the answer to these questions has to be positive. For, regardless of how a Muslim lives or behaves in his native country; regardless of his local loyalties and commitments; and regardless of his ignorance of the world beyond his immediate patrimony, one thing remains certain: he knows that he is a Muslim; he is aware that there are other Muslims in other lands farther afield; he senses the link which attaches him to all his co-religionists; and he will go a long way, when he can or when the opportunity presents itself, to lend to the universality of his creed a concrete dimension such as the performance of the Holy Pilgrimage to Mecca, or extending assistance to other Muslims. Short of that, Muslims throughout the Asian continent will at least harbour a sentiment of solidarity and partnership on both adverse and joyful occasions. A Muslim in China or India will celebrate a Muslim victory in war, and a Muslim in Malaysia or in Pakistan would be incensed if Muslims were defeated, mistreated or humiliated elsewhere.

Despite the paradox involved, one has to admit that the media achieve immediacy. News, good or bad, of events around the globe relating to Islamic affairs, can be watched almost instantly across the Islamic world. There is little doubt that the sight of a new great mosque being inaugurated somewhere; or of crowds flocking to the Holy Shrines of Islam; or of Heads of Islamic states coming together; or, Allah forbid, of Muslims in distress or hardship, can enhance a sense of exhilaration or despair, as the case may be, among Muslims across the world. In any case, the sentiment of unity emerges reinforced.

Sentiments of unity do not preclude, however, political rivalries or enmities. Despite the ideal of Islamic unity, practical considerations have always overridden the cause of Islam. Characteristically, though, these internicine controversies are often coated with Islamic rationalizations in order to make them palatable to the Muslim masses. Thus, rifts between Arab countries, and the current Iraqi-Iranian war, both of which are beyond the scope of his volume, have been 'justified' *inter alia* on Islamic grounds, even by such an unscrupulous Muslim as Saddam Hussein.

Unity and diversity, although not always specifically spelt out by the contributors of this book, are nevertheless the red (or shall we say green?) thread which links between all parts of world Islam in general and Asian Islam in particular.

If this sense of diversity within unity is picked up by the reader, the objectives of this book will have been fulfilled.

Jerusalem,
October 1981

RAPHAEL ISRAELI

In recent years Islam has become the object of a renewed world-wide interest. Yet, most of the uninitiated observers are inclined to oversimplify the phenomenon of Islam and to identify it with the revolutionary turmoil that has swept Iran. Few of them realize that although the political, spiritual and now economic core of Islam has been geographically located in the Middle East, the large masses of the Believers dwell further to the East in Asia, and constitute, by the sheer weight of their numbers, the numerical heartland of Islam. This raises, of course, a big question mark on the applicability of the concept of centre and periphery in the Islamic world. Indeed, the ideal of unity has been fed by the concept of universal kinship whilst, unlike the Western notions of race, nationality and statehood, Islam has always regarded the Faith as the prime criterion of identity. Thus, the world is not divided up between nations, according to this view, but between Muslims on the one hand and all the rest of the world on the other. What do a Malay, a Thai, a Chinese and an Arab have in common? The contributors to this interesting and informative volume attempt to provide an answer, pointing to the unity in diversity which links all Muslims throughout the world and in Asia particularly.

Dr. Israeli is attached to the Asia Research Unit within the Truman Research Institute of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and is author of Muslims in China and other Islamic studies.

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