

Covid-19 and the Clash of Narratives: From Cold War to End of Time (1989-2023)

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Abstract: This paper discusses the impact of Covid-19 on Islamist narratives of end time scenarios that predict the annihilation of a corrupted world and its ultimate replacement by a world order based exclusively on Islam. It does this against the backdrop of Islam's antagonistic relationship with the West, particularly from the ending of the Cold War in the early 1990s to the present day, a relationship conducted within the shadow of the US's attempts to establish a new world order based exclusively on its own values and interests. In the light of the contrary predictions of Francis Fukuyama that the resulting Pax Americana will bring a century of peace and S. P. Huntington a century of conflict, the paper goes on to examine the vastly different world views of the United States on the one hand and Al Qaeda and Islamic State on the other and how they envisage the future unfolding. What the paper shows is that the advent of Covid-19 has served not only to convince traditional Islamic Scholars that Al Mahama, the great battle at the end of time, is well on the way and may even have started, but also to make Muslims in the streets more receptive to such a doomsday message.

Keywords: Covid-19, Cold war, Muslim extremism, Al Qaeda, End-time narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst in the West Covid-19 has spawned the usual number of causal conspiracy theories that seem to emerge following some catastrophic event such as 9/11, the GFC (Global Financial Crash), and indeed the current corona virus pandemic (see Bodner *et al.*, 2020), the Islamist response appears to have been significantly different. This has variously attributed Covid-19 not to emerging 5G rollout technology, a biological pathogen that somehow escaped from a Chinese laboratory, or a trumped-up crisis to enable governments to impose new anti-democratic controls on their citizens (Taylor, 2020). Rather, it is being heralded as confirmation of ancient prophecies foretelling the approach of the apocalypse and the end of time battle between good and evil, when a world order based totally on Islam will be established.

Embodied recently in recruitment material by Al Qaeda and Islamic State to attract jihadists and foreign fighters, this Islamist narrative tells of the impending obliteration of America's world order of globalizing market-forces unbelief. The roots of this narrative go back in time to the origins of Islam, but the storyline it purveys is more suitably apprehended within the context of what Kepel (2008) has called the battle of narratives and Tibi (2002, 2014, 2015) the clash of politicized 'worldviews'.

These narratives have presented contending and contentious perspectives of international relations since the ending of the cold war, particularly in terms of the tensions existing between the Muslim world and the West and the phenomenon of terrorism in Islamic form. The most well-known and the longest lasting narrative over the 30-year period that has elapsed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the demise of the communist system remains Huntington's controversial 'clash of civilizations' thesis, but neither his nor any other Western based model have become paradigmatic in the way the 'cold war' did by serving to explain nearly everything within the framework of explanation its metaphorical title suggested. Despite regional wars involving the major powers, such as those in Korea and Vietnam, nuclear or all-out war between the US and the Soviet Union was avoided. Whether the Islamist narratives of Al Qaeda and Islamic State, or those purveyed through widely accessed podcasts by traditional Islamic scholars, provide more plausible or more convincing explanations of international relations remains to be seen.

Suffice to say, that while the contending worldviews advanced by President George H. W. Bush (1991), Francis Fukuyama (1989, 1992), Samuel P. Huntington (1993, 1996), the Project for the New American Century (2000), President George W. Bush (2001-02), Al Qaeda (1998-) and Islamic State (2010-) may not encompass the complexities of why the West and the Islamic world are at odds over how the world should operate, they arguably influence how people, and

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governments, not only perceive reality but also react to it. That Covid-19 has occasioned numerous YouTube video clips on Muslim social media and other sources that have a completely different take on the corona virus, what it signifies, and what it presages for world order invites investigation and analysis within this ideological context. In this paper we attempt to throw light on how militant Islam has tended to reframe Islam's historic relationship with the West, its injection of an eschatological dimension to this narrative reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the impact such a storyline is having on the popular imagination of a growing number of Muslims.

WESTERN NARRATIVES

The logical starting point is the narrative of American unipolar world order that President George H. W. Bush first proclaimed in 1991 following the sudden fall of the US's Soviet rival, a rivalry that had divided the world since 1945. Based initially on an American formula of liberal democracy, free markets, and international consensus, Bush committed the United States to build a 'new world order' that would establish a single global system governed by the 'rule of law, not the law of the jungle' (Bush, 1990, 1991, 1992). Although foreseeing a role for the United Nations in this enterprise, Bush later clarified that if it proved necessary the United States would 'act alone', since it was the only power with the resources and strength 'to shape the future' and maintain the peace (Bush, 1991, 1992).

Summing up what Bush had called a 'rare transforming moment of world history' in 1991, Francis Fukuyama rather cryptically claimed, under the title *The end of history and the last man* (1992), that the US had evolved the 'final' and 'universal' form of human government, which it would uniquely bring to the world. 'No one else' could do this. Russia could no longer offer an alternative and Islam as a political system would only ever appeal to a small minority of 'fundamentalist' Muslims (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992, 1999, 2001, 2004). He seemed to be in no doubt that under America's custodial 'leadership', the 21st century would be a century of peace.

Posed against this triumphalist vision of America's peace-making destiny, Huntington advanced a diametrically opposite narrative of international relations. Not only would the next century, he posited, witness conflict on a large scale between entire civilizations, but also a resurgent Islam would become

the West's main protagonist in determining how the world would function and what its future would look like (Brasted & Khan, 2012; Huntington, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Mostofa & Brasted, 2020).

In 1993, when it first appeared, Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis was universally derided by scholars as utterly wrong. Although it continues to be cited in hundreds and probably thousands of studies as the starting point for thinking about the post-cold war context of international relations,¹ the story it tells is still regarded as essentially fanciful. While the longevity of the thesis has given critics pause for thought that he may have got some things right (Haynes, 2019: 6) the same old question marks remain hanging over it (Brasted & Khan, 2012; Brasted *et al.*, 2020).

In the event, 9/11 served to deflate the certainty of Fukuyama's 'end of history' narrative and its projection of a century long Pax Americana. It immediately paved the way for President George W. Bush's 20 September 2001 declaration of a 'war on terror,' and his 17 September 2002 National Security Strategy statement, both of which prescribed a different world order to his father's (Brasted, 2006). Based on the neo-conservative Project for the New American Century's [hereafter PNAC] September 2000 blueprint for maintaining US supremacy in the world – 'Rebuilding America's Defenses' – this envisaged extending America's 'global leadership' through the 'pre-eminence' of its 'military forces' and pushing forward the frontiers of its own 'values' and 'interests' regardless of the 'costs'. With international support being sought from 'allies and friends,' rather than from the UN, the new world order of 2002 was expected to provide 'the basic principles of a global consensus' (Brasted, 2006; PNAC, 2000; US Government 2002).

The US subsequently followed this agenda to the letter in committing troops to 'multiple theatres of conflict', such as Afghanistan in 2001 to hunt down Osama bin Laden, and Iraq in 2003 to destroy its alleged weapons of mass destruction, topple Saddam Hussein, and introduce liberal democracy. With the US soon getting bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, it became clear even to its supporters that this strategy was unlikely to persuade large parts of the Muslim world to willingly join George W. Bush's world order (Fukuyama 2004). The 'war on terror' was failing to

¹It has been calculated that Huntington's thesis has been cited over 35,000 times in Google Scholar in the period 1993-2018 (Fox, 2019).

deliver what it had promised, of making the world 'safer' and 'better' (Chomsky, 2007; US Government, 2002).

As a framework of international relations analysis, the 'war on terror' began to be overtaken by Huntington's 'clash of civilizations'. It simply made little sense of 'homegrown' terrorist attacks against culturally based Western targets - railway stations, restaurants, newspaper offices, footpaths, bridges - or Europe's stand against Muslim symbols such as the burqa or minarets or the furore caused by Danish cartoons satirizing Muhammad. While Huntington's thesis may be miles away from becoming the 'real winner' Niall Ferguson declared it to be in 2006, it provides an 'instant take' on where the battlelines of civilizational conflict between Islam and the West resided, over for instance the position of women in society, the separation of religion and politics, the basis of law, and the location of sovereign power: with God or man. With metaphorical simplicity it captures the stereotypical Islam that the Western media has habitually presented to the public of Muslims in conflict with the world at large (Brasted, 2009).

In Huntington's reading of the future the world will increasingly be split into dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them' (Huntington, 1993a). While not speculating about how this might end up, he suggests that the outcome would certainly be influenced by the extent to which the Muslim masses succumbed to the worldview of radical Islamists (Huntington, 1996).

THE AL QAEDA NARRATIVE

Until the advent of Islamic State, the dominant anti-Western discourse was the simple, historically based narrative propagated by Al Qaeda. In line with its declaration of war on the United States and its allies in 1998 (Brasted & Khan, 2012), this tells of Muslim resistance to foreign invasions starting with the crusades, continuing with Ibn Taymiyya's preaching of jihad against the Mongols in the 13th century, and culminating in the military omnipresence of the US in the Middle-East since World War Two (Laden, 2005). So frequently did Osama bin Laden invoke the heroic example of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) that it is as though he aspired to lead a similar fight-back against the Americans, or latter-day crusaders as he was inclined to call them.

Ostensibly, this fightback is to take the form of a defensive jihad in retaliation against the West for

occupying Muslim lands, exploiting Muslim resources, and exposing Muslims to the 'worst civilization' in the 'history of mankind'. The prime objective is to expel the US, its allies, and Israel from the Middle East altogether. European countries would be spared if they agreed to stop interfering in Muslim affairs and even the US was offered a truce if it pulled its troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan (Laden, 2002). In this narrative the clash will end when all 'unbelievers' are forced to leave all Muslim territories.

A more in-house narrative, dismissing any accommodation between Western and Islamic 'civilizations' as an 'infidel notion' designed to postpone the 'inevitable clash' between them, projects a very different struggle. Through 'offensive' or violent jihad, the road ahead involves total war to 'occupy' the lands of Western 'unbelief' and 'exchange their systems of government for an Islamic system'. In effect Al Qaeda was committing itself - and the whole of the Islamic world if it could win it over - to a conventional, uncompromising, global fight to the finish as a religious duty (Brasted & Khan, 2012; Laden, nd).

No timeframe or chronology has been placed on this mission. In the aftermath of 9/11, the immediate type of engagement resorted to was a series of isolated 'lone wolf' attacks on soft targets, such as rush hour railway commuters in Madrid (2004), London (2005), Moscow (2010), or hotels and restaurants in Mumbai (2008). Whether incidents such as these are designed to counter unbelief has not been elaborated and they have not appeared to have impacted or brought forward the departure of the United States from Afghanistan, Iraq or the Middle East.

Rather, with the Arab Spring bringing civil war to Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and bitter and bloody sectarian violence escalating between Sunni and Shia Muslims, it has been the Arab heartland of Islam itself that has seemed to be facing civilizational challenge. Against this backdrop, it was unlikely that Al Qaeda's narrative of jihad, defensive or offensive, would make much headway, especially when it involved the indiscriminate killing of Muslim civilians (McGeough, 2011). A decade after 9/11 Al Qaeda acknowledged that its destruction of the twin towers - the symbols of American economic and commercial strength - was merely an episode in a 'long protracted war' that stretched back 1300 years and could go on until Al Malhama (the great battle at the end of time) (Al-Maqdisi, 2011; Ibrahim, 2011).

ENTER ISLAMIC STATE

What does start to make ground is the doomsday story that Daesh or Islamic State, as it has become more commonly known in the West, began to circulate when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed its leadership in 2010 and declared a worldwide caliphate in 2014 (Mostofa & Doyle, 2019; Mostofa & Ware, 2019).

More theologically oriented than Al Qaeda, although Al Qaeda too picks up on this story line, IS begins to propagate end of the world messages in most issues of *Dabiq*, a journal it launched in July 2014 after the small town of Dabiq in northern Syria, and *Rumiyah*, which replaced it as its online propaganda vehicle in September 2016. Dabiq is believed to be the site of a prophesied battle in which Islamic forces conquer the infidel crusaders once and for all (See, for example, Al Qaeda, 2013, 2014; IS, 2014, 2016).

In this narrative, which is based on Hadith literature and Muhammad's prophecies, the Antichrist (Masih ad Dajjal) duly appears on the scene and prophet Isa (Jesus) returns to earth to lead the Muslims - alongside the Mahdi in some versions - to final victory over the Jewish-led forces of unbelief. The outcome is the establishment of a world order based totally on Islam (See Al Qaeda, 2013; IS, 2015; Al-Hanif, 2015; McCants, 2015; Mostofa, 2019, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d, 2022; Mostofa & Brasted, 2022).

While IS continues to support and strategically encourage conventional, asymmetrical soft target attacks on the West - for example, against competitors in the Boston marathon (2013), the staff of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris (2015), pedestrians on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice (2016) and tourists on London Bridge (2019) - its recurring message to Muslims is to stand up and be counted when the end-time comes. Joining Islamic State is prescribed not only as preparation for the Day of Judgment, but also as holding out the divinely accredited prospect of martyrdom and entry to paradise (See, for instance, IS 2015). This is particularly the case for South Asian Muslims, whom both Al Qaeda and IS have exhorted to prepare for cataclysmic war with India - *Ghazwa al-Hind* - a prophecy which is usually attributed to Muhammad (Reed, 2016). This story has gained traction following recent jihadist attacks on Indian-controlled Kashmir, and actions by India's Modi government to revoke Kashmir's special constitutional status and alter and potentially strip Assam's 4 million Muslims of Indian citizenship

(Gettleman & Kumar, 2019; *The Economic Times*, 2019; *The Economist*, 2019). All of India's 195 million Muslims, in fact, would be rendered foreigners if the BJP government's agenda of making India a Hindu state came to fruition.

According to Jean-Pierre Filiu, apocalyptic narratives of any kind were generally regarded by Muslims with suspicion before the US invaded Iraq in 2003 (Filiu, 2011). But with Iraq and subsequently Syria and other parts of the Middle East in flames, they begin not only to resonate with the Muslim public whose world started to fall apart, but also to appeal to the foreign fighters IS sought to recruit to defend the caliphate (de Graaf, 2016; McCants, 2015).

TRADITIONAL SCHOLARLY REINFORCEMENT

What is of significance is that this proverbial Day of Judgment is deemed to be close at hand not only by militant Islamists, but also by many traditional scholars including, for example, Maulana Lutfur Rahman, Maulana Syed Ali Raza Rizvi (Rizvi, 2020), Mufti Kazi Ibrahim² and Sheikh Imran Hosein³. Giving the Al Qaeda and Islamic State narratives added poignancy are the messages such scholars convey through their books, articles and YouTube videos - to followers and general public alike - that the countdown to *Al Malhama* or the great war has already started.

As early as 2009 Sheikh Imran Hosein, who has written many books and articles on the subject of Islamic eschatology and is internationally recognized in the field, identified a number of present-time portents of the 'last days' in *Gog and Magog in the modern World*, which he linked to Hadith predictions. Grouped into environmental, political and social categories, these have recently been updated on his official website. Some of the more feasible matches are listed below:

- i. Environmental signs: Arabia turning green (Hadith No. 2208), the sea of Gallilee drying up (Official Website of Imran Hossein, 2017), the Euphrates being diverted to reveal a mountain of gold (or oil) (Hadith No. 6918), and Bedouins competing to build the tallest skyscrapers (Hadith No. 6301).

²As an Islamic scholar Mufti Kazi Ibrahim is well known among Bengali speaking Muslims. Some of his works, especially youtube lectures, have been translated into English and are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJVdogXATY0>

³Sheikh Imran Hosein has over 20 published books on the subject of Islamic and Biblical end-times. His works are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SheikhImranHosein>, and his official website is available at Hosein's official website is available at <http://imranhosein.org>

- ii. Political signs: the rise of Israel under the Anti-Christ (Hadith No. 4294; Hosein, 2011), the invasions of Iraq and Syria (Hadith No. 2896), the 'worst people would become leaders', and the proliferation of violence and murder in the world as the last age approaches (Hosein, 2009).
- iii. Social signs: 'Women will dress like men', 'men will dress like women', same sex marriage, sexual promiscuity, the breaking down of the family, and the progressive collapse of societal standards (Hosein, 2020a).

However, what has served to give the Islamic end-time discourse not only considerable currency but also prima facie immediacy is the corona virus pandemic. In Islamic eschatology the advent of life-ending pestilence signals the predicted coming of the Last Day when the current world will end, and a new order of existence will begin (Hosein, 2003, 2018).

COVID-19

If initially, a number of conspiracy theories were floated involving the United States as both the perpetrator and beneficiary of the transformation Covid-19 would trigger (Basit, 2020; Foysal, 2020; Jones, 2020), these gave way to a growing belief that it was America's world order that was destined to be destroyed. Covid-19 seemed to herald its demise and destruction more compellingly than 9/11. With Covid-19 sweeping through Europe first and then hitting the United States on an even larger scale, Al Qaeda and Islamic State readily integrated the virus into their anti-West narratives. In April 2020 Al Qaeda issued a statement in both English and Arabic that the pandemic was 'a sign of God's fury towards humanity' not only for its failure to adhere to God's rules, but also because of the 'obscenity and moral corruption' sweeping Muslim countries. However, while exhorting Muslims to repent and confront the 'crusader enemy', Al Qaeda made it clear that it was Western civilization that was the underlying cause of the problem and the real object of God's wrath.

IS came to this position too, though not until Covid-19 had achieved pandemic status. As the first news of a new corona virus emerged out of Wuhan, IS interpreted this as God's punishment of 'communist China' for its treatment of the Uyghur population (Basit 2020; Mekhennet 2020). Later, when the virus reached Iran, Shia Muslims were projected as the intended

target because of their alleged blatant idolatry. With Covid-19 and its various strains reaching all corners of the earth, both IS and Al Qaeda began linking its spread to the coming of end time, and as a way to 'ramp' up anti-American recruitment (Mekhennet 2020; Mashal & Abed, 2020). The AQIS [Al Qaeda in the Sub-Continent] affiliated group, Ansar Al Islam, did not hesitate to adjust the story-line accordingly (Hasan, 2020).

The apocalyptic reading of Covid-19 was by no means the preserve of Islamist terrorists. Some of the already mentioned Muslim opinion-makers also made much the same link. Prominent among them was Maulana Lutfur Rahman, one of Bangladesh's best-known Islamic orators, who identified Covid-19 as foretelling the arrival of Imam Madhi and end time (Rahman, 2020). Sheikh Imran Hosein of Trinidad was another who openly proclaimed that Covid-19, accompanied as it seemed to be with disserted cities around the world and the suspension of economic activity, was the beginning of Malhama, the great battle to decide humanity's fate and the world order that would replace America's (Hosein, 2020).

CONCLUSION

End-time narratives have come to constitute a major part of extremist propaganda, and Covid-19 played a role in helping them gain momentum. In times of global crisis and upheaval it is not unusual for apocalyptic theories of doomsday to spring up. In a sense, Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' also countenances the possibility of a future catastrophic confrontation between Islam and the West - the 'mother of all conflicts'. But unfolding in civilizational rather than prophetic religious form, this 'clash' is not envisaged, certainly not by Huntington, to result any time soon, if ever, in a universal Islamic world order.

Whether or not Muslims on the street have heard of Huntington and Fukuyama or their theses, they know about the end-time prophecies and have every reason to believe them. The world they inhabit is a world of obvious transcendent disorder (Brasted, 2006; Tibi, 2002). In the wake of America's interventionist foreign policy in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Al Qaeda and IS have succeeded in neutralizing George W Bush's constabulary world order of peace (Kepel, 2008). And poverty, corruption, deprivation, war and everyday terrorism have tarnished the allure and credentials of any human made world order for an increasing number of Islamic scholars.

With Covid-19 hitting even affluent countries hard - particularly because of mandatory lockdowns, the accompanying dislocation of the world trading system, and inflationary pressure - it is reasonable to assume that the poorest countries and especially war-torn Muslim countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are being hit a great deal harder. Even countries with relatively low levels of corona infection could feasibly be brought to the brink of civil and political breakdown because of economic chain reaction effects.

The question is, how long will Covid-19 continue to impact the end of the world narrative, or be utilized for purposes of Islamist radicalization? In the event that humanity adapts to this pandemic, as to others in the past, the timeline for the final battle for a new world order based on Islamic principles will doubtless be reset.

Hamas's deadly assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israel's no-holds barred response against Gaza and the US's unconditional support of Israel may help reset it for the Muslim world. In the event of a military escalation by Israel and Palestinian civilian casualties, it is not difficult to see that Armageddon could be made to appear just that one step closer? In the meantime, although Fukuyama's narrative of a century of American democratic hegemony has already been rendered erroneous by the turn of events, Huntington's controversial clash of civilizations thesis looks set to continue tantalizing international relationists as something that may still play out.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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