

Conclusion: the failure of history

Contemporary western concerns about Islamic resurgence, particularly since the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the spread of radicalism post-9/11, has led to a huge revival of academic interest and debate in relation to a much older component of Orientalism, the theory that Muslim societies face an inherent difficulty in making the transition to occidental forms of liberalism or parliamentary democracy. Islam, many have argued, is in essence incompatible with the good or 'open society'.¹ The debate on the modernisation paradigm in Muslim states has invariably centred on gender and the role of women, and has crystallised around certain enduring symbols of perceived Islamic oppression, such as the veil, the harem, seclusion, forced marriage and physical violence. The deep ambiguity of the conservative colonial regime in Algeria, right down until the start of the War of Independence in 1954, was that it condemned the uncivilised and inferior nature of the Muslim family and the treatment of women, but simultaneously had a deep political interest in sustaining such a system of oppression as it provided the key legitimisation for maintaining the exclusion of Algerians from full citizenship and power-sharing. Polygamy and child-marriage were viewed by colonial ideologues as incompatible with the republican order. This reactionary position seemed to be all the easier to sustain before 1954, since the colonial governing class entered into a tacit 'gender pact' with conservative Islamic religious clerics and leaders who also had an interest in protecting the family and women from the dangers of secularism and 'westernisation'.

A minority of better-educated, urban Algerian women, along with communist and progressive Catholic activists, began to challenge this conservative block during the turbulent phase of nationalism between the Liberation and 1954. But the outbreak of the War of Independence marked a radical shift in two respects: firstly, the emerging women's organisations were rapidly dissolved and merged under the unitary umbrella of the authoritarian FLN. The most widely shared socialist

and liberal internationalist perception of Algerian women at war, one that was later powerfully reinforced through Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* and the works of Franz Fanon, was one of heroic armed fighters that were actively dynamiting all the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women as secluded and supine slaves of male domination. But this misperception provided evidence more of the successful nature of FLN propaganda than a meaningful transformation of the role of women. Algerian women did break through some of the constraints of gender, as have women almost universally in modern times under the exceptional conditions of 'total' war in which their labour power and skills became necessary in the desperate struggle for national survival. But the most widely shared male perception of women's active participation in struggle was that this was a purely temporary thing, and that once independence was gained they would revert to their 'natural' domestic function as mothers and wives.

For many historians this particular pattern of war-time 'liberation' of Algerian women, followed by a peacetime reassertion of 'normality' and the status-quo ante, will hold few surprises since it is a pattern that has been witnessed in innumerable global wars, insurrections and patriotic struggles. But what was unusual about the War of Independence was the extent to which this rather typical pattern was further radically distorted by the cross-interference from a French 'emancipation' strategy which was to carry extremely negative long-term consequences for the future women's movement. Algerian nationalism, building on the intellectual traditions of *Ulema* reformism, characterised women's emancipation as an alien, secularising movement orchestrated by military and colonialist interests. This interpretation was quite correct, however, in the post-independence context this nationalist reaction to the subversive germ of an alien and dangerous feminism was deployed to attack the very principle of equality and women's rights, in favour of a highly conservative patriarchal model of society.

Which takes us to the second radical shift precipitated by the war, the U-turn executed by the colonial government after 1954 in relation to Muslim women's rights. Initially it seems surprising or highly contradictory that a huge army of occupation, a largely male-dominated organisation in which the values of the warrior rested on a conservative view of female domesticity and subordination, should have had any interest in the plight of Algerian women. A complex of factors contributed to this innovative shift: faced with significant progressive reform of family law in Tunisia, Morocco and elsewhere, the French government did not want to be seen to fall behind and to give a hostage to those interests that were seeking to pillory French colonialism before the UN and the

court of international opinion. Emancipation was also seen as preempting the dangers of the FLN itself organising women and offering to liberate them; as the means to win over an oppressed half of the population to support *Algérie française* and as a means of penetrating into the protected sphere of the Algerian family in order to gain intelligence; and finally as a way to modernise the overall society and economy, through civic engagement, education and training.

Overall this strategy failed miserably, a failure that was linked to the extraordinary inability of European decision-makers to recognise the enormous weight and complexity of Muslim society and its deep-seated durability and powers of resistance to colonial attempts to re-shape it in its own image. The pseudo-revolutionary optimism of '13 May 1958' and the secretive orchestration of crowd euphoria by psychological warfare officers convinced many soldiers and settlers that there was indeed mass Algerian popular support for unveiling and emancipation. But this was largely an illusion. Also working in the direction of a naive optimism and over-confidence in the ease with which transformation could be brought about was the unquestioning Eurocentric belief in the superiority of western familial values, and the assumption of an inexorable evolution towards this model that would be readily embraced by all educated and rational beings. In reality the French, even when backed up by a huge army of occupation, faced extraordinary difficulty in introducing reforms or social engineering that attempted to transform the fundamental social and cultural structures, and in particular of the family, the core building block of the entire Algerian order and a key site of resistance.

'Post-Marxist' or revisionist historians of the 'classic' revolutions, especially of the French and Russian Revolutions, have since the 1970s tended to emphasise the limitations of radical movements to effect a root-and-branch change in the deeper social structures of the *ancien régime*, structures which tended to survive underground only to resurface later. From the 1920s onwards several states engaged in the authoritarian, 'top-down', modernisation of Muslim societies, and in particular of the role of women and marriage law. The best conditions for such 'state feminism', as in the case of Mustapha Kemal in Turkey and Bourguiba in Tunisia, was where a charismatic leader was able to benefit from a high level of populist support and nationalist fervour to effect change. Even under such optimum conditions traditional family and tribal structures remained deeply entrenched and resilient, but in the instance of Algeria such a reform agenda was both imported by a foreign power and attempted under the worst of conditions, during the political chaos and massive violence that accompanied a particularly long war of decolonisation.

Any meaningful transformation of the patriarchal family would have required a long time-scale, a sustained reformist endeavour, but time was not on the side of the French government and the generals, who were driven by the instrumental goal of obtaining a rapid or even immediate change in women's lives as part of the ambition to win and terminate an unsustainable and crippling colonial war. Moreover, for all the glowing propaganda surrounding the MSF women's circles, the EMSI medical teams, and schooling of girls, these interventionist organisations were simply too thin on the ground to effect any significant change. The government lacked the economic and qualified human resources to sustain this programme, and the army commanders consistently prioritised budget allocations to counter-guerrilla operations (acquisition of helicopters, weaponry, etc.) and the 'real' war, which left those dedicated on the ground to a strategy of contact with Muslim women desperately short of funds and equipment. Finally, the objective of emancipating Algerian women as a key ingredient of the strategy of revolutionary warfare, the battle for hearts and minds, was fatally contradicted and undermined by the violence and repression of military operations, and in particular by the large-scale destruction, uprooting and displacement of the peasantry into quasi-concentration camp conditions. As Vincent Monteil commented, before quitting Algeria as the Soustelle regime sank into a cycle of deepening repression, 'I am convinced that we are heading for a catastrophe. I persist in my belief that it is not possible to combine both repression and "reform": a choice must be made'.²

A comparative perspective shows that the French emancipation agenda in Algeria was not entirely unique and can be related to a much longer tradition of the western 'civilising mission' in the Maghreb, Middle East and Asia. Over the last century the power-games of Orientalism have, in particular, been played out over the representations of Muslim women and their bodies, and especially of veiling, which was strategically deployed as a sign of the very essence of Islamic society, the perception of an 'uncivilised' order that was based on the subjugation of women, despotism, polygamy, the harem and sexual perversion. The French military intervention in Algeria during 1954–62, in its emphasis on un-veiling and the drive to a western style emancipation, derived its force from this Orientalist current in European colonialism, but also seemed to foreshadow the revival of global Islamophobia after 1979 and the eventual moves to 'liberate' Muslim societies by US-led neo-imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The seismic shift of 9/11 has tended to obscure the fact that the roots of an Islamophobic surge in the USA and Europe can be found much earlier, in particular from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that was

symbolised by westernised women reverting to the *chador*.³ The bitter controversy in France after 1989 over the 'headscarves affair', whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear Islamic dress in secular state schools, was indicative of a shift towards fear of an Islamist threat that was no longer perceived as only an external enemy, but one that was now located inside the 'west'. But the closest parallel to the Algerian War was to come with the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq when the coalition forces attempted, through military conquest, to induce 'regime change' and to export a western model of 'democracy' and of the good society.

The tone of this 'liberation' was established first in its most evident 'Orientalist' form during the invasion of Afghanistan when President Bush and the American right discovered a newfound mission to free Afghan women from the oppression of the 'medieval' Taliban and the sinister *burqa*. Not unlike the women propagandists of the MSF during the Algerian War, US 'feminists', funded by Revlon, Clairol, L'Oréal and various fashion magazines, promised to bring to unveiled Afghan women, western beauticians and tips on make-up and style.⁴ That George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld should suddenly appear as the defenders of women's rights might seem anomalous, but was not without historical precedent. A century earlier Lord Cromer, Governor of Egypt, had supported the liberation of Egyptian women from the living incarceration of Islam, while simultaneously opposing the suffragette movement in Britain,⁵ while Generals Massu and Salan were unlikely champions of female emancipation. The common link between Cromer, Massu and Bush is that all three conservatives deployed a stereotype of cruel Orientalist oppression so as to legitimate western intervention, rescue fantasies and the 'civilising mission'.

Susan Faludi notes that the White House concern for Muslim women stopped as quickly as it had started, once the bombing intervention had begun in October 2001,⁶ but the propaganda image of the *burqa* set the tone for the later invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In the case of Iraq the Orientalist stereotyping of a backward Islam, as symbolised by women, did not serve American propaganda purposes quite as well, since the coalition confronted a more secular and modernised society in which women had achieved a high level of education, welfare rights and employment. If women needed to be 'rescued' from poverty and repression in 2003, this had less to do with the regime of Saddam Hussein than with the drastic deterioration in living standards due to the ferocious economic sanctions imposed over the previous thirteen years. The illiteracy rate for women climbed from a low of 8 per cent in 1985 to 45 per cent in 1995.⁷

As the US and British governments pushed towards war through late 2002 and early 2003 numerous experts on Iraq and the Middle East warned of the problems that could be faced in attempting to 'liberate' such a complex society, the difficulty of engaging in post-invasion economic investment and reconstruction, and the dangers of political destabilisation that might undermine 'regime change'. The question was raised as to whether America had an exit strategy that would enable it to hand over power to a stable, 'democratic' Iraqi government. Events on the ground, including the triggering of a civil war and economic meltdown, were quickly to confirm the direst predictions. The catastrophic failure of US decision makers and planners can be significantly linked to an inability or refusal to learn from history, and to understand why it was that similar neo-imperial military interventions into Muslim societies, from the French in Algeria to the Soviet role in Afghanistan, had ended in defeat. This is not to say that the US military showed no interest at all post-9/11 in the Algerian War: indeed the Pentagon, bracing itself for the invasion of Baghdad, began to study Pontecorvo's film, *The Battle of Algiers*, but this was not to learn from the crucial political lessons of French defeat but rather from an interest in the triumphalist claims of Massu's parachutists that they had developed counter-insurgency techniques that had successfully crushed Muslim terrorist networks embedded in an urban society.⁸ Media sources claimed that President Bush kept a copy of Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace* as his bedside reading. But US leaders were more interested in anti-guerrilla strategies than taking note of the bigger picture, and examining why France had, despite its military superiority, lost the war.

Underlying the imperial hubris of Bush and Blair was a singular failure to engage in a well-considered evaluation of the history, sociology and politics of the 'enemy' nation. Four months before the invasion of Iraq Blair invited six academics to Downing Street, three specialists on Iraq and three on international security. The Arabacist George Joffe recalled, 'We all pretty much said the same thing. Iraq is a very complicated country, there are tremendous inter-communal resentments, and don't imagine you'll be welcomed'.⁹ Blair, added Charles Tripp, showed little interest: 'I felt he wanted us to reinforce his gut instinct that Saddam was a monster. It was a weird mixture of total cynicism and moral fervour'. Even more extraordinary was the fact that fifty-two retired British diplomats, many with a close knowledge of the Middle East, wrote in April 2004 an open letter to Blair deploring the lack of a pre-war analysis of Iraq and the naivety of plans to import a democratic society. A similar disdain for the lessons of the past, a fatal amnesia, was also noted among US leaders by many commentators. Irene Gendzier

noted the impoverishment of US analysis of the Middle East which, 'reflects a loss of historical memory, the disappearance from view of the impact of past policies, and an indifference to their human and social as well as political consequences'.¹⁰

By the early twenty-first century it might have been expected that educated political elites would have been highly attuned to the negative impacts of past colonial empires that had unthinkingly imposed their own values on 'inferior' subject peoples. In the post-colonial age of multiculturalism, anti-racism and universal rights it was widely acknowledged that it was no longer morally or politically right to steamroller the culture of other 'races' or peoples. But since 9/11 there has been a significant revival among academic historians and political commentators of the imperial paradigm, a model which suggests continuity between the contemporary USA and past global empires and the ideological over-determination of international policy. An outstanding characteristic of the 'new imperialism' has been a profound failure by key decision makers to try and understand the political, sociological and cultural structures of Afghan and Iraqi societies. The Bush vision of invasion and the 'quick fix' was a dangerous delusion, a misguided optimism that rather backward oppressed 'Arabs' were bound to gratefully welcome US troops with open arms once 'set free'.

In a scenario that was striking in its similarity to Algeria, the US government failed to investigate or understand family and 'clan' structures; entertained a false and dangerous optimism as to its ability to carry out a rapid transformation of occupied societies; provided inadequate funding and resources for programmes of reform and reconstruction; and rapidly lost any initial support among the population through 'good works' by the descent into violence, anarchy and the collapse of already weakened infrastructures. Iraqi resistance to the coalition rapidly coalesced around Sunni and Shi'i militias that lurched towards conservative forms of radical Islamism that portrayed 'western' intervention, as in Algeria, as a secularist assault on the fundamental religious beliefs and identity of Muslims. The progressive Iraqi personal status laws of 1959 and 1978 that banned forced marriage, restricted polygamy, empowered women to seek divorce, and enforced the intervention of the courts, came under attack in the new Constitution,¹¹ while Islamist groups unleashed a wave of violence against women, forcing them to wear the *hijab*, or to retreat from education and employment back into the seclusion of the home. The US thus entered into a catastrophic situation that was largely predictable from the earlier history of Algerian decolonisation. The long-term impacts of French emancipation of Algerian women had been equally perverse, and achieved the very opposite results from

its proclaimed goals. Through the fatal association between women's liberation and the assault on the Muslim nation, the French succeeded in reinforcing the reactionary elements within the FLN and Islamist currents that blocked reform after independence and consolidated the conservative forces that ultimately resurfaced in the brutal civil war after 1992 and a decade of extreme violence that once again was to centre on revealing and the bodies of women.

Notes

- 1 This position is associated, in particular, with the work of Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1998). The literature is far too enormous to list here, but for three excellent and balanced over-views see John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat. Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 edn); Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation. Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), and Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World. September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).
- 2 Courrière, *La Guerre d'Algérie*, Vol. 2, 135.
- 3 On the origins of this Islamophobic current in contemporary France see Neil MacMaster, 'Islamophobia in France and the "Algerian Problem"', in Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells (eds), *The New Crusades. Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 288–313.
- 4 Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 41.
- 5 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 151–5.
- 6 Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 41–2.
- 7 Nadj Al-Ali, 'Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi women between dictatorship, war, sanctions and occupation', *Third World Quarterly*, 26: 4–5 (2005), 739–58; and *Iraqi Women. Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 131–46, 171–214.
- 8 Neil MacMaster, 'Torture: From Algiers to Abu Ghraib', *Race and Class*, 46: 2 (2004), 1–21.
- 9 Jonathan Steele, 'Guys, I'm Afraid We Haven't Got a Clue', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2008 (extract from his book *Defeat. Why They Lost Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008)).
- 10 Irene L. Gendzier, 'Invisible by Design: US Policy in the Middle East', *Diplomatic History*, 26: 4 (Fall 2002), 618.
- 11 Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women*, 245–6.