

# Editorial

Iraq's recent aggression against Kuwait has once more focused attention on the Middle East. Perhaps inevitably this has led to a renewal of interest and comment on the role of Islam in the modern world. Equally, it has contributed to the growing tendency, not only to be found in the popular press, to transform Islam — a word used with a wide variety of meanings — into the new 'enemy', thus creating a potent myth capable of replacing the 'communist threat'. Indeed this new situation has succeeded in bringing East and West together in an effort to combat a phenomenon usually labelled in terms of 'extremism', 'fanaticism', or 'fundamentalism'. And despite the fact that myths do possess their own truth, the gap between myth and reality in this case becomes broader at the same time as the former becomes increasingly mistaken for the latter.

In the USSR fear of Islam owes much to the historic memory of the centuries-long struggle with the 'Tatars'. Though Moscow has remained dominant in the Muslim regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus since the late nineteenth century, the current demographic dynamism of the Soviet Muslim population and the development of national unrest have increased unease amongst policy makers. (*See the articles in this issue of RCL by Critchlow and Broxup.*) Consequently we see less of the old style anti-religious propaganda which depicted Islam as possibly the most reactionary form of religious belief, and more of efforts to woo Muslims both at home and abroad.

Conversely Islam has reacted in different ways to socialism, whether in theory or practice. As the late Hamid Enayat pointed out:

Of all the ideological challenges to Islam in the twentieth century, Socialism has been the most congenial to its overriding temper. It comes closer than nationalism and democracy to Islam's central summons for brotherhood, social harmony and egalitarianism. On a more specific plane, as two systems of socio-political engineering, Islam and socialism are united in their high regard

for collectivism, or a balance between corporate and individual interests, state control, and an equitable distribution of wealth. So while Islam is at variance with nationalism over the latter's basic belief in ethnic specificity as the only valid criterion of group interests, and with democracy over the permissibility of absolute freedom of opinion, it finds itself in no contradiction with the principles of socialism. (*Islamic Political Thought*, (London, 1982), p. 139.)

Hence it was hardly surprising that since the late 1950s there have been attempts to develop forms of Islamic socialism in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere.

Yet despite this affinity for certain aspects of socialist thought, Muslims have remained wary of its inclination to secularism and atheism. In the socialist states currently undergoing revolutionary change there are few signs of Muslim thinkers looking to socialism for inspiration. Rather they turn to nationalism which, for the present at least, transcends religion in mobilising public opinion. Nonetheless, the two are not easily disentangled and it is clear that Islam broadly understood will continue to be of concern to a Soviet leadership desperately seeking ways of keeping the USSR together.

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