

# Unipolar Crusade: America in the Muslim World, 1993–2022

## *Series Introduction*

*Ibrahim Moiz*

The aftermath of the Cold War ushered in the “unipolar moment,”<sup>1</sup> a period where the international order was dominated and shaped by the preferences, and in the image, of the United States of America. A generation later, there is a growing consensus that the unipolar order has given way as new power centers, such as China, consolidate their influence and old rivals, such as Russia, reassert themselves. Washington’s weakened hegemony is often apologetically explained as the result of naivete: the American-headed “West”<sup>2</sup>—bathed in the afterglow of democracy’s triumph over the communist menace at the “end of history”—simply underestimated the cynicism and resilience of such autocratic rivals as Vladimir Putin’s Russia.<sup>3</sup> Often forgotten in such self-comforting narratives is a far more consequential factor: the United States spent a quarter-century in wasteful misadventures, principally in the Muslim world, under the guise of fighting a nebulous “terrorism.”

Much has been made during the last few years of Washington’s supposed retreat from the Muslim-majority regions of northeast Africa and southwest Asia. However, the ongoing genocide in Palestine—funded, armed, enabled, and defended by the United States—gives lie to this characterization: the United States has *not* withdrawn from the Muslim world, but has simply recalibrated strategies to adjust for the emergence of international competitors.

This series of articles examines the legacy of American influence in the Muslim-majority region of southwest Asia and northeast Africa in the era of American hegemony, 1993–2022. During this period, the United States launched direct military action in as many as eight Muslim countries in the region: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It also launched an international campaign—unprecedented in its sheer

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/91), 23–33.

<sup>2</sup> “The West” is largely a contrived, instrumentalist identity, hence the quotation marks. See Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) and Kwame Appiah’s *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Washington insider David Sanger’s *The New Cold Wars: China’s Rise, Russia’s Invasion, and America’s Struggle to Defend the West* (New York: Crown, 2024); American intelligence veteran Glenn Chafetz’s “Russia and China are Part of the Same Problem for the United States,” *Atlantic Council*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-and-china-are-part-of-the-same-problem-for-the-united-states/>; and the professed *cri de cœur* of flamboyant neoconservative ideologue Bernard Henri-Levy, *The Empire and the Five Kings: America’s Abdication and the Fate of the World* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2019).

geographic scope—to securitize and secularize Islam. Further, when the international order’s behemoth cast a suspicious eye at the Muslim world, so too did much of the world. This was particularly the case after 2001, when American “security concerns” over “radical Islam” to a large extent became the concerns, genuine or instrumental, of most other states around the world. “Knowledge is power,” observes a scholar, “but power is knowledge as well.”<sup>4</sup> The unprecedented power of the United States ensured that many of its perceptions and projections of threat and security were reproduced in most smaller states, even those that were not necessarily pro-American in their outlook.

This securitization went further than mere deference to the United States, to an actual internalization of its worldview. Several governments, in Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere, took the American cue and instrumentalized it for their own perceived interests, occasionally even in competition—though more often in alignment—with American policy.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, as in Syria and Uzbekistan, American encouragement only legitimized and further reinforced preexistent repression by secularist regimes; in others, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, regimes refocused their attention on new targets in the name of “national interest.” The upshot was a parochial, paranoid internal policy that went hand in hand with adversarial or suspicious relations toward neighbors—American-occupied Afghanistan with Pakistan, for instance, or Saudi Arabia with Yemen. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this ensured that a foreign, usually non-Muslim, guarantor—often the United States itself—would intervene in the role of benign mediator between Muslim neighbors, a factor that further eroded ummatic solidarity.

## **An American “Crusade”?**

The title of this series consciously uses the term “crusade” to describe American policy toward the Muslim world in the unipolar age. George W. Bush’s usage of the phrase as he announced his “War on Terrorism” was widely portrayed as a regrettable *faux pas* that unnecessarily alienated Muslims—as if militarism and securitization would have been palatable had he simply chosen his words more carefully. My argument, to the contrary, is that American policy represented a crusade proper—not one of Christianity versus Islam, though that aspect was certainly present for some of its proponents. Rather, it was a crusade of a global behemoth imposing its worldview, interests, and preferences squarely on a Muslim world that it judged to be insufficiently receptive to these directives. In the process, Islamic notions of “moderation”

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<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, “Inequality and Theorizing in International Relations: The Case for Subaltern Realism,” *International Studies Review* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim Moiz, “The Indigenized War on Terror and its Implications for the Muslim world”, *Ummatics*, September 12, 2022, <https://ummatcs.org/the-indigenized-war-on-terror-and-its-implications-for-the-muslim-world/>.

and “extremism” were redefined globally according to the security precepts of a non-Muslim power that itself often showed poor understanding of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Writing at the onset of globalization in the early 1990s, one commentator famously described the relationship of conservative traditionalism and neoliberal globalism with the term “Jihad versus McWorld.” “Jihad” here meant local attachments to tradition rather than to Islam per se, though his choice of word was perhaps a revealing slip.<sup>7</sup> During the unipolar period, the United States ended up waging a crusade on behalf of “McWorld”—though often this neoliberal framework was a flimsy cover for a very insular American exceptionalism—against the Muslim world of “Jihad.” This process exacerbated, and in some cases actually triggered, societal ruptures and crises of legitimacy within Muslim countries the impacts of which reverberate till today.

None of this is to suggest that the United States was exclusively or uniformly hostile to Islam. While it had less to do with solidarity than American interests in building a regional proxy, the American war on Serbia in 1999—a major landmark in its post-Cold War military expansion—undoubtedly came as a boon to the predominantly Muslim Kosovars. Both Russia, in Chechnya and Syria, and China, in East Turkestan, are examples of rival powers that actively targeted Muslims. Yet the Russian conquest in Chechnya came at a moment of unprecedented cordiality with Washington, while Beijing’s crackdown on the Uyghurs instrumentalized the same anti-Muslim securitization frameworks normalized by the United States.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, pro-American states, including “Israel,” India, and Ethiopia, pursued their own campaigns against Muslim opponents under the same rubric, almost uniformly with American approval.<sup>9</sup> This series will show that the American crusade during the unipolar period normalized, legitimized, and in

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<sup>6</sup> On the lack of even basic knowledge of Islam by many US security and policy specialists dealing with the Muslim world, see Ibrahim Moiz, “Fundamental Errors,” *layyin137*, April 24, 2020, <https://layyin137.wordpress.com/2020/04/24/fundamental-errors/>.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” *The Atlantic*, March 1992. This was later expanded into a book: Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How the Planet is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together and What This Means for Democracy* (New York: Times Books, 1995). This slippage appears to have been lucrative for the book’s sales. Subsequent editions of the book carried two further subtitles: *How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* and, post-2001, *Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy*.

<sup>8</sup> On Chechnya, see John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia’s ‘War on Terror’* (New York: Routledge, 2007). On China and the Uyghurs, see Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas G. Mitchell, *Israel/Palestine and the Politics of a Two-State Solution* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 166; Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 295; Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, “From Al-Itihaad to Al-Shabaab: How the Ethiopian Intervention and the ‘War on Terror’ Exacerbated the Conflict in Somalia,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 11 (2018): 2033–2052.

many cases incentivized such assaults on Muslims globally to an extent that neither Russia nor any other power could have managed.

The Muslim world itself was far from blameless in this process: too often actors seized on American vassalage and the legitimation of repression to target Muslim rivals of their own accord.<sup>10</sup> Nor was this limited to regimes or even to secularist actors: in almost each of the countries we will survey, certain self-professed Islamists, in countries as far-flung as Libya and Iraq, did not hesitate to opportunistically attach themselves to the American bandwagon against local rivals.

One casualty of the American war in the Muslim world was the expectation that adherents of the “Islamic awakening,” so widely hailed in the late twentieth century, would automatically present a united front in the interests and defense of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Instead, some Islamists were quite happy to secure American financial, diplomatic, and even military aid against internal and regional rivals, even as the United States maintained a strong aversion toward political manifestations of Islam. Without denying the dangers of genuine religious extremism—as defined by Islamic scholarly, not American governmental, standards—one feature of this period was how expansively, selectively, and opportunistically the term “extremism” was employed by both Muslim and non-Muslim actors against their opponents.

## Structure and Outline

This series focuses on the eight aforementioned countries militarily struck by the United States—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—as well as such contiguous contested Muslim regions as Kashmir, Ogaden, and Palestine, whose political struggles against occupation by non-Muslim governments were crucially impacted by the American crusade. This introductory piece outlines the contours and importance of the series. The next article will lay the foundation with historical overviews of the countries under question in the immediate decade or two before the early nineties, providing a picture of the political context in which the unipolar crusade began. Following this, Allah-willing, a number of articles will more closely examine every 3–4 year period between 1993 and 2022, each reflective of its own particular dynamics.

In the mid-1990s (1993–1996), the United States set out to establish itself as the world’s hegemon, mostly directly manifested in a skewed military incursion in Somalia. The next

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<sup>10</sup> On the instrumentalization of American paradigms by Muslim states, see Ibrahim Moiz, “The Indigenized War on Terror and its Implications for the Muslim world,” *Ummatics*, September 12, 2022; <https://ummatix.org/the-indigenized-war-on-terror-and-its-implications-for-the-muslim-world/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Høigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 5.

period, up to the close of the decade (1997–1999), saw it more ambitiously sought to consolidate its global dominance for the upcoming century. The early 2000s saw the launch of the “global war on terrorism,” and the beginning of many of the norms and institutionalized forms of securitization that marked the next two decades. The mid-2000s (2003–2006) were defined by the neoconservative wing of American power reaching its zenith, with a bloody invasion of Iraq, assiduously encouraged escalation of conflicts, including an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, and expanded assaults on Muslim political and religious identity.

With neoconservative legitimacy taking a blow from the backlash of these misadventures, the late 2000s (2007–2009) saw a liberal makeover and aggressive expansion of the same frameworks. During this period, American power—often through airstrikes and fledgling drone warfare—expanded as far afield as Pakistan and Yemen. The early 2010s (2010–2012) were marked by this approach being interrupted by widespread revolts in the Arab world that forced the United States to adjust. Counterintuitively, in at least Libya, Washington rode the wave, supporting some of its former foes in ousting a moribund regime.

The securitization of political Islam returned to the fore in the mid-2010s (2013–2016). It was a factor in American policy on Syria, which shifted from encouraging a revolt to abandoning it for its perceived Islamism, while the United States encouraged a Gulf assault on Yemen. This period also saw the meteoric rise of “Daesh” and the entry of Russia as a competitor-cum-collaborator in the region. By the late 2010s (2017–2019), the policy of the past generation had in part contributed to the takeover of nativists in much of the West, including the United States. This translated to a more scattergun approach to the Muslim world, marked by periodic bouts of escalation and negotiation. The start of the new decade (2020–2022) marks the end of the unipolar period with an ignominious flight from Afghanistan and a clearly antagonistic relationship with rival powers.

These periods mark different phases of the American unipolar crusade on the Muslim world, all of which we seek to analyse in detail. Following these analyses, the final article of the series will examine patterns across these thirty years, trends that ranged from the practical to the discursive. I aim to explain how it was that a powerful, foreign, and decidedly non-Muslim power, with little pretensions to Islamic legitimacy, was able both to stamp its authority on the Muslim world and to shape intra-Muslim relations to such a profound, destructive end.

By and large, neither rightwing, neoconservative, or liberal strands within American politics significantly differed in their approach to the Muslim world during this period: it was fundamentally an approach of securitization and containment characterized by varying levels of aggression. It was outright tragic that so many Muslim countries followed along. One reason that this extraordinary, costly abdication of responsibility by Muslim states has not been holistically analyzed is the parochial territorialization of the Muslim

World by nation-states. To this day, one might see Afghans and Pakistanis, for instance, engage in point-scoring and blame-apportioning arguments without accounting for the profoundly corrosive effect that repeated foreign interventions in the region had on their respective states, peoples, and mutual relations.

Similarly, the failure of the Arab Spring revolts cannot be explained simply as the result of Arab autocrats' self-interest, as some Arab liberals have tended to do. Such an account leaves no room for the fact that American officials—on whose goodwill the same liberals count—had spent some twenty years focused on securitized containment of the Arab world at large, casting autocracy as “moderate” and predictable. That Muslims can analyze and understand the background and nature of events, not simply in their specific countries but as they occurred on a transnational, ummatic level is key to transcending the disasters of the past thirty years.

This series of articles thus aims to provide ummatic value with a comprehensive critique of the past three decades of American hegemony over Muslim-majority regions and its profound implications for the global Umma. By meticulously analyzing the geopolitical, socio-political, and ideological frameworks that shaped intra-Muslim relations during the unipolar moment, the series invites critical, ummatic self-reflection. It highlights how external pressures, coupled with internal fragmentation, have undermined Muslim solidarity, eroded political agency, and instrumentalized religious discourse. Situating the experiences of various Muslim-majority nations within a shared historical and transnational context, the series challenges the parochialism that has often impeded collective action and understanding among Muslims. It emphasizes the need for a unified narrative in navigating the challenges posed by inimical hegemonic powers.

Further, the series constitutes a call to intellectual and practical renewal, urging Muslims to reclaim their agency in the face of global challenges. By documenting the ways in which American policies and securitization efforts manipulated regional frictions, and were internalized and weaponized by Muslim regimes against their own populations and neighbors, it underscores the necessity of fostering independent and principled leadership within the Umma. The series aims to do more than just recount history; but to serve as a blueprint for transcending divisions and dependencies that have plagued the Muslim world. By emphasizing the importance of analyzing transnational patterns and recognizing the interconnectedness of Muslim struggles, it provides a vital resource for developing a cohesive ummatic response to contemporary challenges and envisioning a future that prioritizes solidarity, mutual cooperation, and principled leadership.

*Ibrahim Moiz is a student of international relations and history. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto where he also conducted research on conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has written for both academia and media on politics and political actors in the Muslim world.*

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