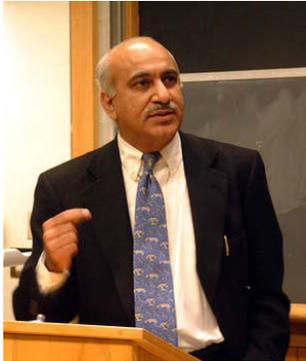


International Affairs Forum Interview

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By M. Patel



M.J. Akbar is the editor of the [Asian Age](#) India's multi-edition English daily and Editor-in-Chief of the [Deccan Herald](#). He is a regular contributor to the Washington Post/Newsweek [Post-Global Column](#). He has been an advisor to the Indian government and served as a Member of Parliament. He is currently a visiting fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#) researching historical relations of the Muslim world with the US. He is the author of [seven books](#) that cover controversial subjects like jihad ([The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the conflict between Islam and Christianity](#)), Kashmir ([Kashmir: Behind the Veil](#)) and communal politics ([Riot after Riot](#)). His most recent book is [Blood Brothers](#).

International Affairs-Forum: Let's begin with a subject you are currently researching: US-'Muslim world' relations. How do you view US foreign policy today, particularly with regards to the Middle East and the larger 'Muslim world'?

M.J.Akbar: Let's first be honest and clarify that it is probably more President Bush's policy, rather than US policy. Because I don't believe that, at this moment in any case, the whole of the United States is behind Mr. Bush's policy. The political dimension here is the use of foreign policy for domestic political reasons, most importantly the use of fear.

Politicization might be the most important change that US foreign policy has incurred these days... politicization whereby it moves away from being an exercise in national interest to becoming an exercise in a political party's interest. Politicization of foreign policy to promote narrow party interests is dangerous, not only for the US, but for all nations. If, for example you applied that yardstick to Indian policy on Pakistan, international politics would become a tool for political parties to mobilize their radical base instead of being an exercise in national interest. We would have a remarkably different [political and military] dynamic in South Asia.

In fact there are two elements that form the core of Mr. Bush's policy – both of which are having a deleterious effect on America's reputation and therefore on America's credibility. They are both belligerent. One is obvious: the use of military force – the war seen in multiple battlefields from Kabul to Baghdad today – as a policy of choice. But the second thing, which is not so obvious, but is equally dangerous, is the 'war of words.'

I give you a very simple example: the use of 'Islamofascism.' The use of this word by which Mr. Bush has chosen to describe the present phase of his multiple wars – and I

mentioned this to CNN yesterday – is absurd. What is Islamic about fascism? Islam is 1400 years old; fascism is a 20th century European phenomenon.

Yes, I agree that some Muslims are fascists, just as some Christians are fascists. But why do you blame Islam for the sins of Muslims. I don't blame Christianity for Hitler. I don't blame the Vatican for Mussolini. Such false characterizations – like *Islamofascism* – do not help... unless your objective is to do some sort of profiling; the same sort of profiling that is done by some people in the RSS/BJP.¹ It sounds very pretty: all Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims. It's a complete and utter lie. Anyone who knew anything about Sri Lankan politics and history would tell you how false that characterization is.² Anyone who has been to Punjab or Japan will know that non-Muslims can be – and are – terrorists.

Terrorism is created by certain political conditions which are not specific to a faith. The reason why there is a misunderstanding in Islam itself – namely the conflation of terrorism and Islam or the stress on jihad to justify this conflation – is because Muslims created a state within the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.³ War has to be a part of any statecraft. Therefore, the first war verse – there was no war verse in the Mecca phase of the Prophet's life when he was actually under persecution – appears in the Qu'ran after he went to Medina, when he was in charge of the city and he had to fight his adversaries.⁴

There too, it is very clear that battle can only take place against occupation, against injustice. There are also conditions of how to go to war and how to conduct it. In the code of Abu Bakr there is an explicit censure of terrorism [or what we call terrorism today] where you are not allowed to kill innocent civilians, women, children and the elderly. You can't even destroy palm trees!

IA-Forum: What could be a constructive role for US foreign policy then, insofar as the Muslim world is concerned?

M.J.Akbar: A constructive role for the US in the Muslim world is something I have been stressing here. 9/11 has – I'm sad to say – been a lost opportunity. In the immediate aftermath of those terrible attacks, a constructive attitude toward resolving problems of the Muslim world would have dramatically changed our entire world.

The three big problems of the Muslim world, as far as I'm concerned, are: poverty, ignorance and gender bias. The world should work together to tackle these three problems. Democracy and political freedom, civil rights are important. But they

¹ The BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party – is a nationalist political party in India. It's website is: <http://www.bjp.org/> Wikipedia's entry on the BJP is available here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharatiya_Janata_Party

² The Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Elam, a Marxist – separatist – guerrilla group in Sri Lanka has carried out more suicide attacks than Hamas, Hezbollah or al-Qaeda from 1980-2003. (Source: Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, 2005).

³ While in Christianity, Christ's dictum was 'render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar.' The state was formed after Constantine's conversion.

⁴ 'The career of the Prophet Muhammad, in this as in all else the model whom all good Muslims seek to emulate, falls into two parts. In the first, during his years in his birthplace, Mecca (?570-622), he was an opponent of the reigning pagan oligarchy. In the second, after his move from Mecca to Medina (622-632), he was the head of a state. These two phases in the Prophet's career, the one of resistance, the other of rule, are both reflected in the Qur'an.' (Source: Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 2004)

cannot resolve matters by themselves. Even with Democracy – which is a system I emphatically support; I have a vested interest in Democracy as an Indian – you have to understand that when you try and export democracy, you cannot have democracy without sovereignty.

IA-Forum: Your answer suggests that you advocate a stronger role for civil society in the Muslim world and that should be the direction of US policy for the region, five year after 9/11. Is that an accurate assessment?

M.J.Akbar: Yes. The answer lies in the improvement of civil society. That is the answer to stopping the next terrorist attack and solving major outstanding issues.

IA-Forum: Groups like Hamas and Hezbollah are also part of civil society. They do provide social services. But they have their own militias and support terrorism. How do you stop these groups?

M.J.Akbar: I don't see anything illogical about the rise of Hezbollah. When other methods of resistance fail, this will also be tried. When national governments are unable to protect the national interest then other groups rise.

IA-Forum: But, how should the US government ideally deal with groups like Hamas and Hezbollah?

M.J.Akbar: The US government should recognize them. After all they are part of national governments. Then bring them to the table and hopefully change their views. I don't say that this will solve matters, but one must engage in frank dialogue where parties recognize each other and their problems. We can't say that we won't deal with America until Mr. Bush stops talking about *Islamofascism*. Not engaging in dialogue is wrong – possibly dangerously wrong.

IA-Forum: How important is the Israel-Palestine issue as a driver of conflict in the Middle East and the larger Muslim world?

M.J.Akbar: [It is obviously] very important. The question today has moved away from the survival of Israel. The main issue now is the presence of refugee camps and the injustice of these camps.

IA-Forum: You mean the refugee camps in the neighboring countries?

M.J.Akbar: Yes. The dismal condition of people living in such camps in Lebanon and Jordan and also of people within Palestine [epitomizes injustice to its observers]. Perceived injustice is one thing that angers Muslims more than anything else. How long will they wait and endure? Three generations have passed! In India we also had millions of refugees in 1947. We didn't make these people wait in refugee camps for three generations. Otherwise it would have been a source of huge grievance and conflict.

IA-Forum: Israel has tried to resolve matters by pursuing a policy of ‘unilateral disengagement’ – withdraw from certain areas unilaterally without engaging in formal negotiations for settlement of territorial issues. With the recent conflict in Lebanon, the merits of this policy seem to be questioned internationally and within Israel: despite withdrawal from southern Lebanon, you had Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces engaged in a *de facto* war. How do you see the Lebanese conflict and the future of the Middle East?

M.J.Akbar: Lebanon is going to be the major staging point in the history of the people in the Middle East. The dynamics of Middle East geopolitics have changed now.

IA-Forum: You mean groups like Hamas and Hezbollah will determine the future as uncivil parts of civil society as well as being part of the official government structure?

M.J.Akbar: These groups are important. But in the end, Israeli soldiers will be released due to diplomatic negotiations. It is amazing that war has failed. And now diplomacy gets a chance!

IA-Forum: One key issue being stressed by political analysts here in the US is the varying response of India – after the Mumbai train blasts – and the killings in Kashmir and Israel – with the kidnapping of its soldiers.⁵ India exhibited a largely restrained response with a strong diplomatic censure of Pakistan, while Israel displayed a ‘disproportionate use of force’ in Gaza and Southern Lebanon. What do you think explains the difference?

M.J.Akbar: In India we know the counterproductive path of excessive reaction. We know that you cannot demonize a community even under severe provocation. In an ironic sense in India it has been an advantage that we have faced terrorism from all religious communities: the Christians in the Northeast India, Muslims in Kashmir, Sikhs in Punjab and Hindu Tamils – following Marxist LTTE ideology – who killed Rajiv Gandhi. Even now the biggest threats of terrorism we are facing in South Asia are either Hindu or atheist Maoists like in Nepal.

IA-Forum: What about the statistic that there has not been a Muslim suicide bomber from India? Is this due to Indian democracy and a secular polity?

M.J.Akbar: That’s an exaggeration. After all, Kashmiri Muslims are Indian Muslim and there have been suicide bombings carried out by them. When there is general reason for anger – as in [Gujarat](#) recently or [Maharashtra](#) – there will be people who will react in a particularly violent way. You cannot condone that but you still have to have the gumption to understand the reasons behind such violence. This is where, I’m afraid, lack of American understanding becomes a huge problem.

⁵ Sebastian Mallaby, “[The Fighters and the Freeloaders](#),” in *The Washington Post* (July 17, 2006).

This is, I think, because America has not really faced the problem of sustained terrorist violence within its borders before. Britain and most other European countries, however, have.

IA-Forum: Talking about Europe, what are your views on the current debate over multiculturalism in Britain following the July 7 blasts and recent arrests and the issue of how do you balance national integration while preserving ethnic, religious, linguistic diversity? Are multi-ethnic societies inherently unstable?

M.J.Akbar: The identity problem is valid. Slowly over time, the identity problem will not last. In-fact it is easier for India to resolve identity issues than for other countries because India has had such deep civilizational roots of unity. Conflict issues have come and gone.

IA-Forum: But even India suffers from religious riots. You mentioned Gujarat.⁶ Even with the last general election, people said that the ruling coalition, despite delivering strong economic growth, did not get re-elected because of communal tensions. Or do you think there were other reasons?

M.J.Akbar: I was happy with the elections of the last general election. Elections soon returned to the topic of economics and that is always the healthiest sign of a democracy: when people vote on bread and butter issues.

IA-Forum: Taking a different track – and you have partially addressed this issue in the beginning – you have written on jihad, particularly in your book [The Shade of Swords](#). Your views seem to have created quite a bit of controversy in India. What is your thesis there?

M.J.Akbar: Jihad is a legitimate concept of war, which has been defined over and over again. It's... I say this quite often: what is the best description of jihad? It's Lord Krishna's discourse to Arjun in the Mahabharata – the Gita.⁷ That's where Krishna says that under certain conditions you have no option but to engage in war, otherwise injustice will rule in the world. It doesn't matter whether you have to kill your brothers, cousins, childhood friends.

IA-Forum: Many reviewers of [The Shade of Swords](#) lament the fact that you place more stress on the lesser jihad – war with the infidel or the enemy – than the greater jihad – war within oneself to become pure.

M.J.Akbar: Of course I did, because the greater jihad is not a [political] problem. If everyone was only striving for internal purity than Mr. George Bush would have never heard of it! My argument in the book deals with the political dimension of jihad. That should be very clear.

⁶ Gujarat Riots Homepage from Rediff – India's version of Yahoo – is available at: <http://www.rediff.com/news/godhra.html>

⁷ The *Gita* is considered to be the Hindu equivalent of the *Bible* or the *Qur'an*. The *Mahabharata* is the epic poem – much like *The Illiad* – which has more than 100,000 verses. Around 800 of these verses comprise the *Gita*.

IA-Forum: What about US-India relations given the imminent nuclear deal between the two countries and India's emergence as a global power.

M.J.Akbar: Better US-India relations would be fine... I think India has probably already emerged as a global power.

My problem with the US-India nuclear deal is that it may actually curtail our emergence.⁸ But it's a deal in the making, so there is no need to declare victory or loss. It is still a work in progress, let's see what happens.

IA-Forum: You think the nuclear deal with India had any impact on Iran's nuclear policy?

M.J.Akbar: The world is watching as to what happens in Iran. After all, the world has accepted India and Pakistan as de facto nuclear states, which sends an important signal to Iran]. It's no longer the big five, it's now the big eight if you include India, Pakistan, and Israel among US, Russia, China, UK, France. Not the big nine, because I think North Korea is on the margins and has problems altogether different from other nations.

IA-Forum: How do you view on the policy community in Washington D.C. As a visiting fellow at Brookings you have been able to observe firsthand the workings of a think tank. Given your previous positions, you also have the advantage of being an outside observer. What is your 'internal-external perspective' on how things work in DC?

M.J.Akbar: This – policy community – is one of the great strengths of DC. American academia and the US policy community are very sophisticated and their views are taken seriously. Every country needs to develop such institutions.

IA-Forum: Have you observed this in Europe and elsewhere?

M.J.Akbar: I have – to an extent – in Britain, though not so much elsewhere. In India we still have an inadequate policy community. But we are developing one gradually.

IA-Forum: Thank you Mr. Akbar.



⁸ M.J.Akbar, "[Is Pakistan Smiling?](#)" Brookings Institution Brief (March 15, 2006)