

Professor Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*

Comment by Professor Hugh Goddard, 17 June 2013

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May I say 'thanks very much', first of all, to Professor Ahmed for the exposition of his book, as it is always good to hear a first-hand commentary about a book from the author himself.

By way of response, let me commend the book to you for three main reasons:

1) First of all, for its imaginative **title**, which ably summarises its **interesting and timely thesis**.

As Professor Ahmed has already said, the book is not mainly about Scotland, though there are some interesting Scottish references. I hope, therefore, that no-one feels that they have been brought here under false pretences, on the basis of thinking of Bashir Maan's book *The Thistle and the Crescent* (Argyll Publishing, 2008), which definitely does focus on Scotland and its relationship with the World of Islam! The thistle in the title of Prof Ahmed's book is Chechen rather than Scottish (deriving from Tolstoy, rather than Sir Walter Scott, and his short story *Hadji Mourad*), but Tolstoy's use of it, parallel to its use in Scotland, demonstrates clearly that it is a very apt universal symbol of tribal or clan society.

The drone is more self-explanatory: we all know what drones are now. They are pieces of military technology, though, which raise difficult moral issues, especially through 'bug splat', as the victims of drone attacks are sometimes called, an awful term which brings to mind the comment of Mahatma Gandhi who, when asked what he thought of Western Civilisation, gave the immortal reply that he thought it would be a good idea! Even the invention of this phrase, it seems to me, is a terrible indictment of some of those who use western military technology. Others in the military, however, have many of the same concerns: compare the comment in the book of Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, the former Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell and now a Professor of Government and Public Policy at the College of William and Mary, who comments in his commendation of the book that this kind of language 'wounds the creators as well, destroying their liberties, polluting their democracy, and destroying their souls'.

Discussion has been raging in the United States, therefore, about the use of drones, including the recent speech by President Obama, on 23rd May. For those of us who work in the British university system, who are currently having to think hard about the 'impact' of our research, it would be a wonderful commendation to be able to say 'this book/this piece of research changed the policy of the US government'; research could hardly have better impact than that! In fact, of course, the book was in the

press before the President made his speech, and the influence of some of those in government, especially Benjamin Rhodes (a deputy national security adviser who actually wrote the speech) will probably have been greater than the book, but it would still be interesting to know whether they too might have been influenced by the ideas of Prof Ahmed's book.

Drone technology can, of course, be a force for good, even if under a different name. The TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference here in Edinburgh last week (as reported on the BBC's 'Today' programme on Friday), provided a remarkable example of this, when Prof Raffaello D'Andrea of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology gave a wonderful demonstration of some of the things which he and his team can do with their team of quadcopters (flying robots), all based, of course, as Prof D'Andrea said, on 'algorithms', so that it is interesting to see the on-going influence and importance of that great medieval Muslim mathematician al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the English word algorithm is derived!

With respect to drones in particular, however, the military ones that is, for some time it has been possible for those of us based in the UK to think that this is a particularly American issue, since it is the US military which invented and is the primary user of them. Since April of this year, however, that has no longer been the case, since the BBC reported on 27th April (2013) that the UK military is now also using drones directed remotely from RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. The moral dilemmas are now therefore ours too.

2) Secondly, for what it has to say about **tribes**.

The main theme of the book, as Prof Ahmed has outlined it, is 'tribes', and the significance of this concept with reference to the crucial contemporary issue of people's sense of identity. In one of his earlier books, Prof Ahmed gives one of the most succinct statements on this topic that I have ever seen, and one which I have quoted often. He refers to someone who said 'I am "Pathan" because I have been Pathan for 3,000 years, "Muslim" because I have been Muslim for 1,400 years, and then "Pakistani" because I have been Pakistani for 60 years or so, a very telling statement about the 'hierarchy' of identities which we all, to a greater or lesser extent, feel.

These intermediate markers of identity, between the individual/immediate family on the one hand and the global religious community/nation on the other are in practice hugely important, whether in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa, and the news often contains illustrations of this. Just to give three examples, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the former General Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, described at some stage how he was also a keen member of the Memon community. This sent many of us who are Islamicists scuttling to our reference works (or the Internet!) to ascertain who are the Memon, and the answer is a community with its historical roots in Gujarat in Western India who became active in trade and commerce globally, the name deriving from the Arabic word 'mu'min' or believer, a fine example, therefore, of a South Asian intermediate organisation.

Secondly, in the Middle East, when in 2008 the BBC's correspondent in Gaza, Alan Johnston, was kidnapped and held hostage for 3 months, commentators revealed that he had been kidnapped by the Dugmush clan: again this sent many Islamicists scuttling to their reference works to find out who the Dugmush clan are, and the answer is an extended family with their own political and commercial interests, which differ significantly from those of the dominant force in Gaza, Hamas. They thus provide another example, from the Middle East, of an intermediate organisation or 'tribe'.

Most recently, here in the UK, when the Al-Rahma mosque was burnt down in North London (Muswell Hill) last week, it was described in the media as belonging to the Somali Bravanese Welfare Association. This again had Islamicists heading for their reference works: who are the Bravanese? The answer is that they are an ethno-linguistic group from the southern region of Somalia, who take their name from the port of Brava/Barawa, and have now established their own networks around the world wherever Somalis are found. Clan, tribe, whatever these intermediate groups are called, they are clearly hugely important, and Prof Ahmed's book makes this very clear, with 40 or so examples given, from places right across the World of Islam such as Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, Turkey etc etc, the book providing almost a litany of such groups.

To the person after whom Prof Ahmed's chair at American University is named, Ibn Khaldun, tribes were sources of virtue and strength, agents of renewal within Muslim communities. To Western imperialists, by contrast, tribes were threats, and it was only the inventions of the aeroplane and the machine gun which shifted the balance of power in favour of the central authorities in the modern period, as seen in the 1898 poem of Hilaire Belloc, 'The Modern Traveller', with its reference to the Maxim Gun - 'we have the Maxim Gun and they have not' - or Bomber Harris rehearsing the tactics which he was later to use against Germany in World War II on the tribes of Iraq in the 1920's and 1930's.

The book makes very clear, therefore, the ongoing issue of the eternal debate between the centre and the periphery, between uniformity and diversity, within modern nation-states, and it is very interesting on pages 347-349 to see the debate within the UK, particularly with reference to the future of Scotland, cited as an example of how this issue can be dealt with constructively.

3) Thirdly, for its **Appendix**.

The most moving part of the book for me, however, was the Appendix, in which Prof Ahmed reflects very personally on what the Glasgow-based novelist Suhayl Saadi, in his 2004 novel 'Psychoraag' (Edinburgh: Black and White Publishing), calls the 'other' partition, not the 'Romantic one' between India and Pakistan which is now associated with Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah etc, but rather 'the carve-up that no one ever spoke about - the one between the two halves of Pakistan. Nineteen hundred and seventy-one. Thirteen hundred and ninety-one.' (of the Islamic calendar) (p.

230). The reference here, in other words, is to the 1971 civil war, or war of separation, between what were West and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and Prof Ahmed, who was a civil servant in the East at the time, does talk about it, very movingly, including through poetry.

In terms of human suffering, the bare statistics about the number of human beings killed, the estimates for the number of civilians killed in this conflict run as high as three million, far outnumbering therefore anything which has happened in the recent conflicts involving different parts of the World of Islam and the West: Iraq and Afghanistan combined are almost certainly statistically less destructive than this 1971 conflict. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi's comment about Western Civilisation, therefore, Islamic Civilisation would also be a good idea!

In the Appendix to the book Prof Ahmed refers to the ethnic chauvinism which he found in West Pakistan following his return from the East, encapsulated in a number of highly derogatory terms used by some West Pakistanis for Bengalis, including 'bingos'. The legacy of the conflict is still the focus of political tensions and legal cases in Bangladesh, and it is very moving, therefore, to read the reflections, and poetry, of Prof Ahmed, concerning this conflict.

The drones and the thistles of the title, and all that they represent, are thus certainly terms which will stick in my mind as a result of reading Prof Ahmed's book. And so too are 'bug-splats' and 'bingos', two very scary indicators of the negative way in which human beings are capable of thinking about and referring to other human beings. The book is thus both timely and topical, and I commend it very warmly.