

# A subtler take on the clash of civilisations

Akbar Ahmed, long a critic of US foreign policy, has now been invited to the White House. So what, asks **Huw Richards**, will he tell the President?

**A**kbar Ahmed should have been in the Oval Office. Instead he was at his daughter's house in Cambridge talking to *The Times Higher*.

The invitation to talk to US President George W. Bush came as Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun professor of Islamic studies at the American University in Washington DC, was on his way to the airport. He had to explain, doubtless with the patrician courtesy that appears to be second nature, that he was already committed on the other side of the Atlantic.

Ahmed has met the President before, "generally on occasions when there have been 40 or 50 other people in the room". He has had more frequent meetings with administration figures such as secretaries of state Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. The White House knows he is no admirer of their foreign policy.

This invitation, though, seemed a breakthrough, with its implication that he would be getting the President's undivided attention. Ahmed had little doubt the invitation was linked to a highly positive review of his book *Journey into Islam* in *The Washington Times* by influential neoconservative commentator Tony Blankley.

Blankley, a frequent adversary in public and broadcast debates over the past few years, said journalists and policy-makers should read the book as an "honest assessment of the real state of Muslim world attitudes and coldly reassess our various policy prescriptions in its light".

It is not as if Ahmed's message has changed. He has been arguing for conciliation and dialogue between faiths — earning the scorn of radical preacher Omar Bakri as an "Uncle Tom who wants dialogue with Jews and Christians" more than a decade ago — and for a more nuanced Western approach to the Islamic world long before he arrived in Washington in the summer of 2001.

A prominent presence on the Washington scene, conducting that interfaith dialogue with figures such as Judea Pearl — father of murdered journalist Daniel — and in non-Muslim locations such as the Holocaust Museum and the National Cathedral, Ahmed had to go to considerable lengths to produce a book whose message would be taken seriously by the people in power in the US.

*Journey into Islam* chronicles a trip, with a research assistant and two of his American students, across the Muslim world — taking in the Middle East,

Ahmed's native Pakistan, Indonesia and, in particular, three Indian cities linked with the distinctive streams of Islam he identifies: Ajmer, the home of mystical Sufism; Aligarh, identified with the modernising version he exemplifies; and unyielding, first-principles Deoband.

One of Ahmed's favourite quotations from the Prophet Muhammad is: "The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr." His concern, underlined by the findings of opinion surveys that he and his students undertook as part of the book, is that such an attitude is seen as dated and out of touch in much of the Muslim world.

Ahmed is not a cloistered figure in either the academic or religious sense. Scholarly interests developed in parallel with his career from 1966 in the Civil Service of Pakistan — an elite chosen by examination, descended directly from the British Imperial Civil Service, through which he rose to become High Commissioner in London. Posts he has held include political agent in Waziristan: "This is the only area that Lord Curzon administered directly as viceroy. It tied up more British troops than the rest of the sub-continent and an entire brigade was wiped out there in the 1920s. It is where Osama bin Laden is now believed to be hiding."

Academic research — writing what he self-deprecatingly calls "dry anthropological studies" — was Ahmed's periodic relaxation from the considerable pressures of such work. This essentially lonely pursuit was seen as slightly eccentric by colleagues: "If I had simply wanted to advance my career, it was important to socialise and be seen. Pakistan is a gregarious society."

There were few complaints from his peer group when he went off as an academic visitor to Cambridge or Harvard — "It meant that there was a vacancy in a good job for a few months" — but Ahmed recalls the incomprehension of a military superior when he turned down a highly prestigious post to take a fellowship at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. "I was only the second Muslim to be invited to where people like Einstein and von Neumann had worked, but he shouted at me: 'You could have been Commissioner for Refugees and instead you want to be a bloody teacher.' He never forgave me."

That career, though, left him with a formidable range of contacts among the Pakistani elite. He was able to interview President Pervez Musharraf for the



**Ahmed: backs a return to the three basic tenets of Islam**

book, while an earlier project — a film he made in the 1990s as part of a multimedia project on the life of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah — was allowed to use much of the army as extras for crowd scenes, although the commander-in-chief refused the reinforcements he requested for one scene on the grounds that, "If I let you have any more troops the Indians will think we're pulling out of the areas they claim, and launch a surprise attack."

Among the messages Ahmed is certain to convey to President Bush when they meet is that Pakistan has the potential to create problems dwarfing any created by Iran or Iraq: "It is one of the leaders of the Muslim world with a population of 165 million, nuclear weapons and an established pattern of command and control in its army."

The very fact that Ahmed received the invitation means that a second part of his message is getting through — that the policy-makers need to hear a wider and more nuanced range of voices concerning the Muslim world.

Recent years, Ahmed argues, have been heavily informed by the headline views of Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, who coined before Samuel Huntington the phrase "clash of civilisations". "Before 9/11 he was merely a very important historian, but then he became the guru of Islamic studies in the US. You have a world in which the media wants 30-second soundbites and he offers a simple thesis."

Ahmed says. Failure to understand the subtle variations of Islam has, Ahmed argues, helped ensure the current ascendancy of the uncompromising Deoband strain. To march into Iraq proclaiming democracy an exclusively Western virtue was not only counterproductive — "It ensured that many Iraqis would

reject it as an imposition by an imperial occupier" — but showed an ignorance of Muslim history and in particular the democratic, modernising strain represented by his own hero, Jinnah.

The West needs also to avoid the "He's a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch" reasoning traditionally applied by the US to pro-US dictators in Latin America, extended to the Saudis and, since 9/11, to Musharraf. Its own ends — and that of the Muslim world — would be much better served, Ahmed argues, by falling back on three basic tenets of Islam: "These are *adl*, meaning justice; *ilm*, the second-most used word in the Koran, which means knowledge; and *ihsaan*, meaning compassion or balance. Muslim leaders need to rediscover the finest tenets of their own faith."

The West also needs to understand this tripod of values, each indispensable to the other, and to understand and treat Muslim governments according to their lights. Without them the Aligarh [modernising] model collapses and [the mystical Sufism of] Ajmer is irrelevant."

He adds the rider that, while recognising the danger of the Deoband model, it would be equally mistaken automatically to equate adherence with violence and terrorism.

If such an alignment occurs, he argues — and influential circles in the US may agree — the future is bleak: "There are 1.4 billion Muslims in the world, and the demographers tell us that one quarter of the population of the planet will be Muslim. If they continue to suffer as they do at the moment, murder and mayhem on a massive scale are inevitable."

We, and George W. Bush, have been warned.

**Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization is reviewed on page 24**