

Forum

Contemporary Chaos and Muslim Youth: Getting beyond Defensiveness and Confronting Our Own Demons

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Why should I, your after-dinner speaker, a time for dessert – for sweetness – be the bearer of *exclusively* bad news, of chapters from the contemporary chaos that seemingly surrounds us. “The Darkness that Surrounds Us,” to call upon the words of a great American poet Robert Creeley, who, I imagine, *never* would have imagined that his own troubling personal vision would become an easily recognized metaphor to be invoked, as I invoke it, at a gathering of Muslim social scientists. Well, there are some good signs, like a nice after dinner mint that one discovers tucked just under one’s plate at the end of the meal, and I *will* get to them.

My assumption is that I am really not here to tell you of things you know, living as you do in the United States ... things you know far better than I, particularly since, as a journalist, I feel on safest ground when I report to you from personal experience. I cannot and will not even begin to address the many moments of humiliation and pain that many American Muslims have experienced in the backlash to 9/11 and the events that have followed, *precisely* because I have been personally spared any those experiences. So, I will address experiences from which I have not been spared.

I have lived abroad, in what could be called the Arab-Islamic world, for forty years. And for me, the trajectory of contemporary chaos and the crisis confronting the Muslim youth has been a long one, long before 9/11. More than half of those years in the Middle East were spent as a journalist, mainly

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as a foreign correspondent and producer-reporter for western media. So, my own sense of a deadly trajectory is conditioned by that.

In 1975-76, I covered the Lebanese civil war as an NBC News producer-reporter. At that time, I designed a T-shirt for myself and my crew – a white T-sheet with the NBC peacock on the front, but, more significantly, with the word *sahafi*, which means “journalist,” written out in Arabic across the back, at the height of one’s shoulder blades. I designed that T-shirt because I *knew* at that time that if either the Palestinian and Lebanese Muslim snipers or the Phalangist Lebanese Christian snipers on the other side of the barricades were to find one of us in his sniper scope and read *sahafi*, he would not fire. It’s true that if somebody in our embattled foreign press corps wrote a well-publicized story critical of the Phalange or other members of the Lebanese right wing militia, a rocket or two might be directed, from East Beirut, at our base in West Beirut: the Hotel Commodore.

Nevertheless, what is significant is that during that one year of some very nasty fighting, not one member of the foreign press corps was killed for political reasons. At the time, the prevailing ideologies among the Palestinian and Lebanese Muslim fighters were highly assorted and often a blend of such elements as Palestinian nationalism, Arab nationalism, and, of course, Arab socialism, Maoism, and other variants of Marxism. What they shared, among other things, was a strong conviction that the American government was an ally of Israel. But we, as journalists, were spared. Significantly, there was at that time no Islamist current among these predominantly Muslim movements.

Less than a decade later, if a reporter wore that same T-shirt, it would have been an open invitation for the distinctly Lebanese Shi`ite Islamist groups to abduct him, hold him hostage, and treat him badly. Two decades after that, my T-shirt would be an invitation to murder. I’m not talking about journalists caught in a crossfire or gunned down at a roadblock by stressed-out soldiers – strangers in a foreign land. I’m talking about being sought out for beheading, of being consciously targeted.

Let me go back to an even earlier time. From 1968-70, I covered the Fedayeen guerrilla campaign against the Israeli occupation, which was largely fought from the Jordanian East Bank across the river onto the West Bank. I was reporting for *Jeune Afrique*, the *New York Times*, and, eventually, for NBC News. Again I saw the same assortment of seemingly secular ideologies. I say “seemingly” because the Fedayeen I hung out with along the Jordan River or later in southern Lebanon were not just generically Muslim. They prayed, many fasted even though exempt by virtue of com-

bat, and could quote the Qur'an just as easily as they could Mao or Marx, or to less and less a degree, Gamal Abdul Nasr.

No doubt, some of their old-fashioned unguided land mines, mostly intended for Israeli army patrols, would, on occasion, kill Israeli civilians. But that wasn't their objective. I felt I was in the company of warriors, not of men who were convinced they had some sort of "higher right" as members of a resistance, be it religious or nationalist, to consciously target and blow away unarmed civilian men, women, and children.

One of the groups I covered was the PFLP (the Jabhah Sha`biyah), who pioneered the hijacking of civilian commercial aircraft, including an Israeli aircraft. In every case I covered, what was significant was how they went out of their way not to kill the passengers; taking them off the planes at Dawson Field or in Cairo before blowing up the planes and even giving them biscuits and a lecture before releasing them. Or in Zurich, shooting out the wheels of an El Al plane so it couldn't take off and then surrendering to the Swiss without harming a hair of any Israeli or other civilians on board. Forgive me, but thinking about that behavior sort of makes me, *astaghfir Allah*, nostalgic for the old seemingly secular Arab Left. (Tragically, the contemporary PFLP has adopted the terrorist tactics of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.)

But at that time, the PFLP was led by Dr. George Habesh, an evolved Arab nationalist-turned-Marxist of Palestinian Christian background. During one of my many interviews with him, he conceded my observation that *his fighters*, in contrast to his political cadre, were what I, as an ex-Marxist and an ex-atheist, would describe as nominal Marxists. These nominal Marxists were men and women who were overwhelmingly, to one degree or another, believing and practicing Muslims. Indeed, as an ex-Marxist and as a practicing Muslim, when I was with these fighters I felt that I was in the company of Muslims. Forty years ago, this meant young male and female Feyadeen raised in traditional Muslim homes where Islam was precisely the five pillars and not an ideology.

I could give you some very dramatic examples of this phenomena and I shall, *insha' Allah*, in an extended essay that I hope to publish someday. That I felt myself to be in the company of Muslims, given their manners, their traditional courtesies, and even a certain elementary but noticeable spiritual bearing, has been particularly *troubling* to me all these years. And that is because in the decade that followed – the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties – when I found myself covering radical Islamist militants in Egypt and Sudan, I would frequently feel, on a psychic plane that took me beyond the sight of these militants at prayer, that I was back in the party. Well, *clearly* I was not.

But what was going on was an existential response on my part to men who believed and declared that Islam was not just a religion, not just the five pillars, but that Islam was an ideology. Indeed, these young militants were pious – but they were pious ideologues, not pietists. And their piety had an edge, like the combative way they stood for prayer, not like the ordinary pietists in the *madinahs* of Morocco, whose spiritual grace and beauty of gesture and movement had so deeply moved me more than forty years ago, when I was in flight from ideology.

Now at this moment, for those of you who are wondering what sort of weird, gut-reaction analysis is being offered up at a gathering of Muslim social scientists, let me invoke, if not necessarily, in my defense, the name of Dr. Hassan Turabi. I first interviewed him when he was serving in Jafaar Numeiry's government as Sudan's attorney general. I was so intrigued by his obvious knowledgability that after my camera crew took leave, I told Dr. Turabi of my curious existential response, as an ex-Marxist, in the company of militants from his own movement. Turabi laughed and said that I was not alone, that even though his movement, the Islamic Front (the Jebhah) had far different slogans and a far different program than that of the Sudanese Communist party, somehow, out in the countryside the traditional Sudanese farmers couldn't tell the difference. And, again laughing, he said that his opponents from the Ummah and the Ittihad parties would tell the farmers that the reason why they couldn't tell the difference was because there was no difference.

Of course, my own personal *apolitical* – if not anti-political – perspective was so close and yet so different from the Islamists of Sudan and Egypt. My flight from Marxism was as much a flight from revolutionary ideology in general as it was a flight from a specific ideology. It was a flight from Leninist utopianism, for I would argue that nearly all modern revolutionary ideology is Leninist in assumption and method. I was in flight from the vision of a society that could be truly and collectively perfected by organized collective struggle, be it the primordial classless society or, now for radical Islamists, a pure righteous caliphate leading the ummah as a redeemed global collectivity ... a utopia so righteous that it justified or moralized (in religious terms) whatever means it chose to employ.

Many of the young Islamists I met were directly or indirectly in flight from what was perceived, after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, as the failure of Arab nationalism and, eventually, even of Marxist socialism. *Not a spiritual failure, but a worldly one.* The answer for them was not my answer – the rejection of ideology – but rather a search for a more viable ideology.

And this was reinforced by the profound misconception that Israel had triumphed in 1967 because it was a religious society and a religious state, in contrast to the supposed fallen or irreligious Arab societies at that time.

But to return to Hassan Turabi. He did not end that particular conversation just with a joke. He went on to observe that as an ex-communist I had to acknowledge, on the other hand, that it was his movement, whether it was called the Islamic Front or the Muslim Brotherhood, which had stopped the communists in the Sudanese universities, and not the Ummah or the Ittihad, the two political parties with ties to two rival traditional religious communities in Sudan whose rivalry dated back more than one hundred years. I conceded the point and noted that in Pakistan, where I had been based to cover the second Indo-Pakistani war and the military's post-war fall from power, it was the Islamist party that never seemed to get more than 15 percent of the vote in those days, just like the Sudanese movement, which was far more effective in blocking communist control of the universities than the more secular and relatively traditional Muslim League.

It took me a couple of decades to look back at Leninist revolutionary movements, be they left-wing or right-wing, be they Marxist or be they right-wing Leninism (Fascism), and to try and figure it out. My conclusion is that on an even playing field, secular or clerical fascism will always defeat communism.

Let me also note parenthetically, and to avoid the danger of indiscriminate catch-all definitions of Islamism, that even Marxism at its most historically significant time was no more monolithic than what I am alluding to as Islamism. Indeed, the great victims of Stalinism in Eastern Europe after World War II were the relatively non-utopian, non-Leninist Marxist political and trade union movements characterized as socialist, or democratic socialist or social democratic, just as this same democratic Marxist current would be, in the cold war years, one of the most effective forces against the communist parties of Western Europe. Nor should any analysis ignore the particularly important development of post-Islamist political movements in the Muslim world, most significantly the current governing party of Turkey, as well as elements associated with the Dawaa Party in Iraq that are just as responsive to what one now describes as democracy, but what we could just as easily call the "rule of law" and the decencies of a constitutional political order.

Indeed, one of the good signs that I promised to allude to earlier is the imperative, felt by both many Islamist as well as all traditional Muslims, to denounce terrorism unambiguously ... to make it increasingly clear in a

series of declarations over the past year that nothing can justify the intentional targeting of unarmed civilians, and that which has been described by extremist Islamists as jihad is, in fact, *hirabah*, a classic Islamic legal category that can best be translated as “terrorism.”

In his critically important essay “Domestic Terrorism in the Islamic Legal Tradition,” which appeared in *The Muslim World* (fall 2001), Sherman Jackson noted that in the classic legal literature on *hirabah*, it is the elements of intimidation, of the terrorist spreading fear and a sense of helplessness in the community, that are central. Jackson quotes the eleventh-century Spanish Maliki jurist Ibn `Abd al-Barr, who defines the agent of *hirabah* as

Anyone who disturbs free passage in the streets and renders them unsafe to travel, striving to spread corruption in the land by taking money, killing people or violating what God has made it unlawful to violate is guilty of *hiraba* ... be he a Muslim or a non-Muslim, free or slave, and whether he actually realizes his goal of taking money, or of killing or not.

And it is clear, in his extensive review of all of the classic legal sources from all of the schools of Islamic law, that the very impersonality of *hirabah*, of terrorism, in which there is invariably no personal relationship between the terrorist and his/her victim, is what makes it more criminal than homicide. And in the eyes of the classical jurists, this is why the terrorist deserves to be sentenced to death regardless of the status of the victim, whether he/she is a Muslim or a non-Muslim.

There have been many declarations this past year from representatives of the Muslim community condemning terrorism. What is particularly pertinent is that it is precisely in the juridical part of the extensive literature of traditional Islam that Muslim thinkers have found a very precise, very applicable, and unsentimental definition as well as an unambiguous condemnation of terrorism.

That is why, in my opinion, the Amman Initiative called last spring [2005] by Jordan’s King Abdallah II was so important. The conference made manifest by the Amman Initiative was organized on the king’s behalf by the Aal al Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, an institute that embraces both the ulema in the most classical sense and contemporary Muslim intellectuals of various perspectives. Together, the ulema and the intellectuals signed off on a document that affirmed the mutual recognition of all classical schools of Islamic law, be they Sunni or Shi`ah, and condemned all attempts to *takfir* Muslims – a doctrine that allows one Muslim to classify another Muslim as

an apostate worthy of being slaughtered. This is the doctrine that has been used in an attempt to justify terrorism, in Islamic terms, within Egypt since the mid-1970s and now is the basis for the almost daily mass murder of Shi'ahs in Iraq.

This declaration, which embraced fatwas by the sheikh al-Azhar, the mufti of Egypt, and the rector of al-Azhar University; Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Ali Sistani and many other outstanding Shi'ah ulema in Iraq and Iran; muftis in Jordan, Oman, and other Sunni countries; as well as by an officer of the Fiqh Council of Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, struck at the very roots of theologically justified terrorism. By mutually recognizing all Sunni and Shi'ah schools of law and by insisting that only those scholars who have mastered the traditional legal disciplines within their respective schools have the authority to issue fatwas, the mainstream ulema and Muslim intellectuals who participated in Amman also explicitly declared that Islam is not a do-it-yourself store-front religion.

Why I find the Amman Initiative particularly significant is precisely because, like the unsentimental legal prescriptions against terrorism derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah by the ulema of the tenth to the twelfth centuries, the Amman Initiative, which clearly reflects a traditionally mainstream Muslim perspective if not necessarily an overwhelmingly popular perspective, illustrates the naïveté of those usually but not exclusively non-Muslim journalists and Washington think tankers – I have a Rand Report specifically in mind – who call for a Protestant reformation of Islam. Well, if we appreciate that at its most radical or self-defining the Protestant reformation was based on the legitimacy of individual interpretation of the holy text outside of an ongoing tradition and the hierarchy that interpreted that tradition, then we are now living through a radical reformation, one equivalent, let us say, to Cromwell's regicide and the Puritan dictatorship, his desecration of holy places, and mass murder of the Irish or of the One Hundred Years War for that matter. And, the most outstanding reformer in that historic context is none other than Usama bin Laden.

Let me put it another way. Madrassahs have been providing basic education, literacy, and sacred texts to otherwise uneducated youths in the Muslim world for hundreds of years without producing terrorists or suicide bombers. Indeed, thanks to the madrassahs, an ordinary or not-so-ordinary Egyptian prior to the Egyptian revolution could live out his youth as a playboy or even a criminal. But at a moment of introspection and spiritual yearning, say at middle age, he/she had the memorized Qur'an implanted in his/her soul to fall back on, thanks to this very system that, in Egypt, was the

equivalent of the first year or two elementary school for those who never went beyond it. In Indonesia, the largest and most tolerant Muslim movement is itself a product of that country's extended version of the madrassah and is led by traditional scholars, not ideologues.

So the problem isn't the madrassah system, but what happened to the madrassahs – what extremist doctrines and what sort of funding by what donors made their way into established madrassahs or provided the dynamic for many, many new ones.

If many liberal- and neo-conservative-inclined journalists or think tankers haven't gotten it, the very secular western left certainly has. As a result, it has formed close alliances, particularly in England, with both pro-Palestine and anti-Iraqi war groups, both of which have stimulated that sense of grievance that surreptitiously becomes a substitute for Muslim identity and that, if scratched at enough like any sore, becomes the basis of that moral equivalence that has allowed such an ambiguous response from within much of the Muslim community in the wake of the second intifadah, 9/11, and even before 9/11. Think of the first bombing of the New York Trade Center in 1993 and the guarded response of many in the Muslim community to its perpetrators.

One of the reasons why I have taken solace in these terrible times from a spate of declarations over the past two years, from CAIR's refreshingly unambiguous "Not in Our Name" and, most clearly, the Spanish ulema's condemnation in clear Qur'anic terms of radical Islamist terrorism in general and Bin Laden and al-Qaeda in particular and by name, is because the phenomena to which these condemnations are reacting – Madrid and London in particular, and Iraq in what is now a daily occurrence – is overcoming the lack of clarity that has allowed communal grievance to displace religious morality.

Over the past few months, I briefly participated in an American Muslim online debate about the importance of these declarations. Much of the resulting discourse reflected the sort of defensiveness and moral equivalence that we, and in particular Muslim youths, must transcend. This current of thought is very prevalent among us, as if all of the sins or crimes of *everyone* else are valid reasons for Muslims *not* to continuously denounce any act of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. And perhaps even more unfortunate, we can believe that these injustices, committed by others, are reasons for us, as Muslims, not to attempt to understand what it is in many Muslims' modern understanding of Islam that allows such crimes to take place and be justified in its name.

From 9/11 until recently, many of our community spokespersons would insist that these crimes were the work of a tiny minority that had no significant support or sympathy among Muslims, and that this terrorism had nothing to do with Islam. But one could argue that, to the contrary, the willingness to *takfir* Muslims and then murder them and then justify the murder of whoever (be they Muslim or non-Muslim) does not agree with whatever utopian vision one is ready to kill for, has afflicted Islam since its earliest years. I refer, of course, to the Kharijites, who murdered the caliph Imam Ali and put women and children, as well as non-combatant men, to the sword because of a utopian doctrine. This, the first and most grievous heresy in Islam, was suppressed and universally repudiated by the ulema in the earliest centuries, but was revived as an operational arm for radical Islamist revolutionary ideology in the mid-1960s and at a time when it had little or no reference to Palestine, Iraq, or Chechnya.

That is why we must reject the insistence, that echoes within all of us, on finding only those “roots and causes” of terrorism that are exclusively outside of a particular way in which some, perhaps even many, Muslims understand Islam. Is the “cause” colonialism? Amir Abd al-Qader al-Jaziri warred for years in the mid-nineteenth century against one of the cruelest strains of European colonialism – the French conquest of Algeria – without committing one atrocious act. On the contrary, he punished his own troops if they committed atrocities in retaliation for those committed by French troops, atrocities that are now par for the course among Muslim terrorists. And this same Amir Abd al-Qader, exiled by the French to Damascus, intervened with his own corps of armed bodyguards to save the lives of Syrian Christians threatened by a murderous Muslim and Druze mob in 1860, a mob responding – *no doubt, to legitimate economic grievances* – as some sort of moral open season for mass murder.

Perhaps the answer, I would suggest, and particularly to Muslim young people, is that Amir Abd al-Qader, who was unquestionably a great warrior, was above all a *noble* warrior who considered Islam above all as a personal path to a spiritual reality and *not as a religion emptied of spiritual content and then turned into a modern revolutionary ideology in which utopian ends justify any means*. Indeed, the duties – sources or imperatives of social justice – toward one’s family, neighbors, and, by analogy, one’s nation all stem from that personal struggle on that personal path to God that characterizes the greater jihad.

Traditional Islam, be it in the Indian subcontinent or the Arab world, was once perfumed by an inner spirituality. In the United Kingdom, far more

than is the case in the United States, Muslim young people have two options: to either hold onto a traditional Islam that was entirely enveloped in an immigrant ethnic idiom, particularly language, dress, and ethnic insularity, that was inconceivable for most of them for they are precisely that – British young people of Muslim faith, and the language, dress, and cultural insularity are foreign and, when imposed, embarrassing. The alternative was to assimilate into the prevailing mass youth culture that, in the United Kingdom, tends to be particularly mindless, promiscuous, drug and alcohol afflicted, and often criminal. Now this narrow prism has been increasingly radicalized by *grievance-obsession*. We must recognize that a grievance, however real, in fact *particularly if it is real*, can become *self-defeatingly* obsessive. Every successful immigrant group or successful sector of an immigrant group that has come to America and Europe, both Muslim or non-Muslim, seems to understand this intuitively.

So, radical versions of Islam offered an alternative, one that combined the fashionable left-wing identity politics of the past few decades with a Muslim identity that claimed a false universality ... a false universality in its denial that all living and worthwhile human culture, Muslim or not, beyond the most basic religious rites and law, is invariably local. The alternative that was not particularly available was traditional Islam, with its core of spiritual priorities, enshrined and expressed in our Anglo-American English language and in those strands of Anglo-American culture – one thinks of Shakespeare, the Lake poets, and the school of politeness and good manners that is massively endangered, but still alive and easily assimilated into an Anglo-American Islam – a process that has occurred on a limited individual middle-class basis in Britain and even more so in the more educated, more middle-class second-generation as well as the convert Muslim communities in the United States.

And in a world of overreaching materialism and militant secularism that could be described as fundamentalist, this evolving British traditional Islam and its American equivalent must find true allies. I suggest that those true allies are to be found among those faith communities – Christian and Jewish – ready to acknowledge our common Abrahamic origins.