

## Narrating religious insecurity: Islamic–Western conceptions of mutual threat

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One does not need to travel very far these days before encountering complaints that Islam poses ‘a fundamental threat to the survival of Western Europe’s cultural identity’, and even to Western civilization as a whole.<sup>2</sup> For some, this is no longer just a threat, as Europe has already been taken over by Islam and should now be christened ‘Eurabia’.<sup>3</sup> The challenge is to recover it, if at all possible. These claims are as revealing as they are intriguing. To start with, they are usually made by groups on the far right of the political spectrum (even though increasingly leaders from the ‘centre’ are joining in with their own laments about the ‘failure of multiculturalism’ or the refusal of Muslims to integrate). But these same groups depict Islam as a primitive, violent and backward religion, which should not, according to this perception, pose as a serious competitor to Western civilization, let alone overwhelm it. No less remarkable, however, is that these dual (and apparently self-contradictory) claims are a mirror image of the discourse of radical Islamist groups, which regard Western civilization as a threat to Islamic culture and never cease to rail against its moral bankruptcy and degenerate nature.

Of more relevance to our current discussion is the interestingly complex process of constructing the insecurity/identity nexus at play here. Jeremy Waldron’s otherwise valid assessment of the centrality of the ‘hard Hobbesian link between security and survival’ to the utility of the concept of ‘security’,<sup>4</sup> becomes problematic when applied to the

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their generous support for his current research.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Betz and Susi Meret, ‘Revisiting Lepanto: The Political Mobilization against Islam in Contemporary Western Europe’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 43/3 (2009), p. 325.

<sup>3</sup> Bat Ye’or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Waldron, ‘Safety and security’, ch. 1 above.

security of collective entities. At one point in American history, the freeing of black slaves (and later granting their descendants civil rights) was regarded by many as a serious threat to the American way of life, even to the safety and security of 'Americans'. At other stages, the influx of Catholic southern Europeans was deemed a problem, while more recently, the late Samuel P. Huntington (of 'Clash of Civilizations' fame) argued that the influx of identity-conscious Hispanics into the United States threatens US identity.<sup>5</sup> While religion does play a role in the construction of identities, it is often subordinated by other constituents of identity. The most vociferous campaigners against the 'Islamic threat' are not usually the most devout of Christians. In the Muslim world it is equally difficult to disentangle the spiritual from the nationalist, the tribal, sectarian or the merely parochial.

In this regard, there is nothing 'solid' about the concept of security, for the very way in which a 'threatened' identity is constructed could make it more insecure. Were one to argue that American identity becomes meaningful when it is defined as white (or even 'Aryan'), Anglo-Saxon Protestant, then by this very narrow circumscription of that identity, threats to it would multiply. As a rule, the more exclusive and oppressive a system is, the more threats it is likely to face, and the less secure it is.

While identity figured prominently in the modern Muslim debates, security was conspicuous by its absence in the revivalist discourse, usually figuring in the context of discussing other themes, such as peace and war.<sup>6</sup> These days, the discussion of 'jihad' is of course ubiquitous, but even here, security is not emphasized. Political concepts such as the 'state', which was a neologism in Islamic discourse, figured prominently, as did such concepts of political relevance as pluralism, liberty, human rights, women's rights and constitutionalism, all of which received ample attention.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. The 'blessing' of security

This is a clear indication of the impact of external factors on the initiation of such debates, for the concept of security is a central one in core Islamic

<sup>5</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Clark, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd, 2006 [1955]).

<sup>7</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (London: Malaysian Think Tank in London, 2008).

texts, where security is referred to frequently as a divine gift and blessing, as a coveted public good or as a divine reward for virtue. However, since the concept has been discredited due to its deployment as a legitimating tool by oppressive and unpopular regimes, there was no incentive to dwell on it.

In the Quran, the key text of Islam, the audience (believers and non-believers alike) are reminded frequently of God's grace and blessings in granting them security. In particular, Prophet Muhammad's tribe of Quraysh is repeatedly chastised for its lack of gratitude for this bounty bestowed on it by God, as it had been blessed with living within the acknowledged holy sanctuary (*haram*) where, even in pre-Islamic times, violence was strictly prohibited within its perimeters. Members of the tribe of Quraysh are addressed thus in an early verse:

Let them worship the Lord of this House.

Who has fed them after hunger, and granted them security after fear.

(Quran, 106:3–4)

On another occasion, with Quraysh pleading security concerns were they to accept Islam, they are again rebuked:

Now some say, 'If we were to follow the guidance to which thou invitest us, we would be torn away from our very soil!' Why – have We not established for them a sanctuary secure, to which, as a provision from Us, shall be gathered the fruits of all [good] things? But most of them are oblivious [of this blessing].

(Quran, 28:57)

In both these quotes, security, as safety from arbitrary violence, is linked closely to security from hunger and want. In another verse, this condition of security and prosperity enjoyed by Mecca is depicted as an answer to a prayer from the Prophet Abraham, reputed to have built the holy Ka'aba with his son, Ishmael.

And, lo, Abraham prayed: 'O my Lord! Make this a land secure, and grant its people fruitful sustenance – such of them as believe in God and the Last Day.' [God] answered: 'And whoever shall deny the truth, him will I let enjoy himself for a short while – but in the end I shall drive him to suffering through fire: and how vile a journey's end!'

(Quran, 2:126)

Here, security and prosperity are bestowed by God in an answer to a prayer from the Patriarch, but it would appear that they are not conditional on being righteous. Those who go astray can still enjoy this gift,

but will be punished in the hereafter. But in another verse, it is indicated that loss of security and prosperity could be punishment for sin.

God sets forth a Parable: a city enjoying security and peace, abundantly supplied with sustenance from every place: Yet was it ungrateful for the favours of God. So God made it taste of hunger and terror [in extremes] [closing in on it] like a garment [from every side], because of the [evil] which [its people] wrought.

(Quran, 16:112)

By the same token, the bestowal of security after a condition of fear and want could be a reward for righteousness, even though it is still a divine favour requiring gratitude and recognition. As the early Muslim community gained in power and prosperity, they were reminded about their near past when they were few in number and lacked security.

And remember when ye were a small [band], despised through the land, and living in fear lest men should extirpate you; but He provided a safe asylum for you, strengthened you with His aid, and gave you Good things for sustenance: that ye might be grateful.

(Quran, 8:26)

A report relating to the early period of Islam, when Muslims faced severe persecution in Mecca, relates that the Prophet Muhammad was angered by requests from his followers to pray for a speedy rescue. After reminding his followers that believers had in the past suffered even more horrendous persecution without wavering in their faith, he made this promise: 'By God, this cause [Islam] will be victorious to such an extent that the lone rider would travel from San'a to Hadramut, fearing nothing but God, and wolf attacks on his sheep' (Bukhari, no. 3416).

However, as in all religious perspectives, personal and collective security, in the sense of freedom from arbitrary violence, is not the whole picture. For there is, first, an extra dimension relating to the priority of religious freedom and integrity. Thus protection against religious persecution is seen as a paramount value, and in fact the only justification for war (other than repelling direct aggression).

And fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but commit no aggression, for verily God loves not the aggressors ... And fight them until there is no more religious persecution, and if they desist, then no aggressive action should be taken, except against wrong-doers.

(Quran, 2:190, 193)

Religious persecution is deemed to be the most serious threat to safety and security, and a more serious crime than murder.

They will ask thee about fighting during the appointed sacred month;<sup>8</sup> say: 'Fighting in it is a grave transgression; but turning people away from the path of God and denying Him, and the Sacred House, and expelling its residents there from – [all this] is yet a greater transgression in the sight of God, since religious persecution is a greater transgression than killing.

(Quran, 2:217)

A further dimension is introduced by pointing out a 'metaphysical' dimension for security. In a conversation between Abraham and his people, he is warned against provoking the wrath of their gods, which could do him serious harm. Abraham is not impressed.

And why should I fear entities that you worship side by side with Him, seeing that you are not afraid of ascribing divinity to other powers beside God without His authority? [Tell me,] then, which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure – if you happen to know [the answer]?: Those who have attained to faith, and who have not obscured their faith by wrongdoing – it is they who shall be secure, and it is they who have found the right path!

(Quran, 6:81–2)

And of course, as is the case in other Abrahamic religions, the ultimate security for the believers is found in paradise, an abode of eternal peace, security and prosperity, without threats of any kind.

## 2. Practical systems of security

In all the above, security is regarded as a collective good, emanating from divine grace, either as a gift or a reward for virtue. It could be withdrawn for sin or transgression. Nothing is indicated about collective or individual responsibility for safeguarding it, except through cultivating collective and individual virtue. With regard to collective security, principles were outlined for self-defence and adequate military preparations that would help 'deter the enemies of God and yours' (Quran, 8:60).

With regard to internal security, only a brief reference is made to resolving violent conflicts.

Hence, if two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them; but then, if one of the two [groups] goes on acting wrongfully

<sup>8</sup> A convention setting aside four agreed months on the lunar calendar as sacred months during which fighting is not permitted existed in pre-Islamic times, and was confirmed by Islam and further strengthened by outlawing the expedient shifting of the months.

towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably [with them]: for verily, God loves those who act equitably.

(Quran, 49:9)

This close linkage between security and justice remains a fundamental one. In practice, perceptions of security provision progressed along a line of increased securitization of social functions. During the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors as leaders of the community, the so-called Righteous Caliphs (11–40 AH/632–661 CE), political leaders did not use bodyguards. This appeared to pose no problem, except that three of the four Caliphs were murdered. The general idea was that coercion was not necessary or permissible within a community that was supposed to adhere to values of fairness and solidarity and observe the law as a religious obligation. This view was pushed to interesting extremes by the third Caliph, Uthman (r. 23–35 AH/644–656 CE), during whose reign the capital, Medina, was occupied by rebels from Egypt and Iraq demanding his resignation. The rebels' complaints centred on accusations to Uthman of deviating from the principles laid down by his predecessors (in particular his favouritism towards his own clan) and the appointment of and support for oppressive regional governors.

The rebel occupation of Medina had violated many Islamic norms, not least among which was violating Medina's status as a sanctuary on equal status with Mecca, where armed action was strictly prohibited. Then there was defiance of legitimate authority and resorting to violence to resolve disputes. However, Uthman was adamant in his refusal to reciprocate the use of violence. He rejected offers by his supporters in Medina to fight off the rebels, and dismissed a proposal from a loyal governor to send an army to save him. He also refused an offer of protection in Damascus. His argument was that he wanted no bloodshed, but he would not want to leave the holy city or impose armies on its inhabitants.

What was remarkable about Uthman's principled pacifism was that it had stood the question of the state on its head. In this conflict, it was not the state which monopolized violence, but the rebels. While Uthman continued to plead his case vociferously, in sermons at the mosque, in meetings, in letters he sent to the provinces and to pilgrims in Mecca, he gave strict instructions forbidding the spilling of blood in his defense. This inverted relation of state restraint and the freelance violence of the

self-styled advocates of reform was to have a lasting impact on the subsequent course of Muslim politics. For it became the starting point of a prolonged cycle of violence and counter-violence in which the restraining effect of a legitimate state had no place.<sup>9</sup>

The ensuing succession of civil wars ended up with the establishment of authoritarian dynastic rule, which was at variance with the general understanding of Islamic norms, but was accepted grudgingly because of the apparently futility and high cost of attempting to dislodge it. That was an eminently Hobbesian ‘trade-off’ between security and liberty, where idealism was sacrificed for the sake of order and stability. The ideal of a free and pious religious community, governed by law, not by men, and where the Caliph was seen as a mere appointee by the community, paid an average salary and devoid of any privileges, including that of a bodyguard or a private court, was soon abandoned in favour of an authoritarian figure who ruled over the community rather than with it. However, this formula remained essentially unstable. The clear distinction which began to appear very early in the debate between a righteous caliphate and its not-so-righteous successors represented, at one level, an admission of failure. But it also offered a continuing and, by nature, destabilizing, critique of the political system, which continued to provide a source of support for counter-system movements, and incentives for the repeated rise of new ones.

In spite of a number of serious reform movements, such as that undertaken by the Umayyad Caliph Umar II (r. 99–101 AH/717–720 CE), and a number of revolutions, the dominant political system continued to be an authoritarian dynastic one, based on what I have called the ‘Damascus Model’.<sup>10</sup> This model was based on a combination of tribal aristocracy and features borrowed from the Byzantine and Persian monarchies, with some Islamic components added. But the model proved durable, in spite of many ‘radical’ revolutions against it. The Abbasid Revolution, which brought down the Umayyad Dynasty in 132 AH/750 CE, was an ambitious project which sought to restore the caliphate under the rule of the Prophet’s clan of Hashim. But the broad coalition broke up into two warring factions: the Abbasids, descendants of the Prophet’s uncle, and the Alawis, or Shi’ites, loyal to descendants of the Prophet’s cousin and fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib. The former set up the Abbasid Dynasty, which (formally) ruled most of the Muslim

<sup>9</sup> El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, p. 161.

<sup>10</sup> El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, pp. 168–77.

world until the Mongol invasion of 1258. The latter led a number of rebellions, succeeding in establishing states in Persia, North Africa and Yemen (with the latter surviving until a republican revolution toppled it in 1962).

However, none of these states deviated much from the 'Damascus Model', with various degrees of malignancy. A further deterioration occurred as a result of dynastic infighting and the ascendancy of army commanders (mainly Turks and Persians), and de facto independence of province rulers, often setting up their own local dynasties with only nominal allegiance to the Caliph (as happened in Egypt, Syria, North Africa and many Eastern provinces). From the middle of the ninth century (CE), the state was under effective military rule, with the Caliph as a mere titular head, while the provinces that had not been taken over by rival Shi'i or Umayyad rulers were effectively autonomous. The Ottoman state, which emerged in the fourteenth century (CE), achieved moderate success in reunifying the central regions of the land of Islam under its rule and led the Muslim world into the encounter with modernity. However, vast Muslim regions (in Persia, South and South East Asia and Africa) remained outside its rule.

### 3. Modern rethinking

Islam's encounter with modernity was nothing if not traumatic. The relentless political decline and the erosion of the international status of the Muslim community were accentuated by the ascendancy of the West and the advent of the novel phenomenon of colonialism. Leading Muslim intellectuals and statesmen began, from the nineteenth century, to see the main challenge facing the community as one of safeguarding Muslim independence first, and confronting Western cultural and economic hegemony second. Colonialism confronted Muslims as a threat of collective enslavement to foreign powers, and the consensus was that it was to be resisted. In the process, European ideas of individual freedoms and constitutional rule were embraced by sections of the elite, and some political reforms along these lines were advocated and experimented with as a means for restoring the strength of failing Muslim states. These included constitutional movements in Tunisia, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Most of these experiments failed due to resistance from rulers and did not save the countries involved from falling under the colonial yoke. However, even at that time, some leading thinkers (such as the prominent statesman/scholar, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi



(1822–1890)), criticized Western support for individual freedoms and, especially, for minority rights, for undermining Muslim states and thus harming the cause of freedom in general.<sup>11</sup>

The interlude in Middle Eastern history which Hourani referred to as the liberal age (from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War II) had witnessed even more tension between the competing values of liberalism and democracy than was the case in Western history. Advocates of secular liberal values, such as the Khedive Ismail in Egypt (r. 1863–1895), the secularist faction in the 1905–6 Iranian Revolution, the Shahs of Iran from the 1920s to 1979 or Mutafta Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) in Turkey, were opposed by the traditionalist majority, and thus could not afford to be democratic. In subsequent stages, liberalism was challenged by a variety of transformative projects: nationalist, pan-Arabist, socialist and Islamist. Concern with individual liberties or democratic freedoms was not high on the agendas of the competing groups, with each keen on transforming the communities rather than empowering them. For them, the combined challenges of transforming society (either through modernization, revolutionizing or Islamization) and fending off imperialism trumped any concern for individual or minority rights.

Nevertheless, an intra-Islamic debate began on issues of freedom and rights following the 1948 promulgation by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Saudi Arabia was one Muslim country that expressed reservations about some Articles in the UDHR (relating to freedom to abandon one's religion and women's equality) which it thought could contradict some provisions of Islamic law. Related concerns coloured the subsequent debate, where Muslim thinkers continued to argue over whether or not modern human rights norms could contravene some provisions of Islamic law, and whether, and how, a reconciliation between the two was possible.

As Mayer rightly points out, this debate has remained largely academic until the advent of Islamic revivalism from the late 1960s, with its demands for the re-imposition of Islamic norms and legal practices.<sup>12</sup> The debate prior to that phase was largely polemical, trying to prove that Islam had superior conceptions of human rights to those proposed in modern Western discourse. But the debate itself represented a recognition of a moral challenge posed by these modern conceptions. Many trends

<sup>11</sup> Albert Habib Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 67–102.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), p. 2.

emerged to deal with this challenge, ranging from the conservative/revivalist, which rejected modern human rights norms as an alien cultural imposition, to liberal secular trends, which wanted to embrace these norms wholesale. However, the majority position, and the one that reigned in practice, was one of eclectic pragmatism, which borrowed heavily from modern legal practices while continuing to pay lip service to Islamic norms.<sup>13</sup> Legal codes in Muslim countries were often borrowed wholesale from European codes, or inherited from colonial administrations, with Islamic legal norms preserved largely in marginal enclaves, such as personal law. Although some states and groups tried to propose 'Islamic' human rights schemes to rival the UDHR while accommodating Islamic norms, these schemes remained largely defensive and polemical, failing to either challenge the normative and philosophical foundations of the UDHR or satisfy those norms.<sup>14</sup>

In theory, the Islamic revival threatened additional restrictions on personal liberties, especially for women and minorities, and also posed a threat to the security of those opposing it. In practice, however, the problematic governing of the human rights situation in Muslim countries remained comparable to that in other developing countries, where precarious and insecure regimes resorted to repressive policies to maintain their grip on power, at times using religion as a pretext.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the main threats to liberty and security came not from the imposition of Islamic laws, but more from arbitrary rule. Thus, even in countries like Iran, Sudan or Saudi Arabia, which claimed to observe Islamic legal norms, the complaints of opponents centre mainly on practices that have no connection with Islamic law, such as arbitrary detention, torture, extra-judicial killings, restrictions on freedoms of expression and association and political exclusion on tribal, ethnic or sectarian bases.

#### 4. Security, liberty, community

It can be seen, therefore, that security (closely associated with prosperity) is accepted in Islamic discourse as a legitimate aspiration for any community,

<sup>13</sup> Heiner Bielefeldt, 'Muslim Voices in the Human Rights Debate', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 17/4 (1995), pp. 587–617; cf. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>14</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi, 'Reviving Controversy: Islamic Revivalism and Modern Human Rights', *Encounter*, Vol. 6 (2000), pp. 117–50.

<sup>15</sup> I. William Zartman, 'A Search for Security Governance Regimes', in Garnham, David (ed.), *Democracy, War, and Peace in the Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 48–64; cf. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights*, pp. 1–3.

and perhaps the most coveted public good. It is a gift bestowed by God or earned by living virtuously, and preserved by gratitude (which entails, in addition to righteous living, abstaining from aggression and acting justly). But salvation represents, in this religious perspective, an integral and vital component of security, for which religious freedom is essential. In the absence of religious freedom and justice, mere physical security is meaningless in fact. Collective action, even if it endangers security in the narrow sense, including war and resistance, becomes necessary and obligatory.

Salvation remains an individual responsibility, however, and the advice for individuals facing persecution is to emigrate in search of a safe haven where religious freedom could be enjoyed (Quran, 4:97–100). Moral responsibility in Islam is also ultimately an individual responsibility. When a community of believers comes into existence, it assumes a collective responsibility for observing justice, co-operating in righteous deeds, defending religious freedom and repelling aggression, without eliminating individual responsibility. There are several levels of community: family, clan, locality, community of believers, People of the Book (Jews and Christians) and humanity at large. Relations within the family and clan are based on mutual responsibility for each other's welfare (including legal responsibility for maintenance and burden-sharing, as in the case of 'blood money' paid to the families of victims), while a more diffuse responsibility of mutual solidarity and mutual defence falls on the Muslim community as a whole and its chosen allies. Relationship with the People of the Book is based on a common appeal to shared Abrahamic principles (belief in the one God and acknowledging the validity, in principle, of the totality of the Abrahamic prophetic heritage). With humanity at large, relationships are supposed to be based on principles of mutual non-aggression on the basis of justice and respect for religious freedoms.

Part of the moral challenge posed to Muslim traditions emanates from the partial loss of moral advantage with regard to treatment of minorities. Until fairly recently, Muslims could boast a theologically validated tolerance of most categories of non-Muslims at a time when ethnic cleansing appeared to be the norm in Europe and elsewhere. Since the promulgation of the UDHR, the Muslim stance on minorities could no longer claim that edge, since an apparently more advanced formula had been proposed, providing for tolerance on the basis of equality. This has occasioned demands for the updating

and modernization of Islamic teachings in order to take account of this new environment.<sup>16</sup> The debate continues.

In practice, the dilemma is even greater. For Muslims have not lived up to their principles, even if those had remained beyond criticism. The 'realistic' approach adopted for most of Islamic history had meant tolerating oppressive, corrupt and inefficient political systems. The Muslim encounter with modernity had made the flaws of these systems even more starkly obvious, and occasioned intensive rethinking and activism in order to bring about change and reform. Until the recent popular uprisings in the Arab world, the success has been limited.

A complicating factor remains the relationship with the outside world, and the West in particular. The West has presented itself, since the dawn of modernity, as the world of Islam's most credible rival for world hegemony. With colonialism, the West posed the most serious threat to Muslim survival since the Mongol genocides of the thirteenth century. However, unlike the Mongol challenge, which was neutralized by the latter's embracing Islam, the Western challenge remained multi-dimensional: military, economic, cultural, religious and ethical. The responses to these challenges came from diverse sources and continue to exhibit a multiplicity of perspectives and standpoints.

It would therefore be erroneous to speak in generalities of an Islam/West conflict and thus fall into the error of abstraction and generalization. The area known as the Muslim world has been shaped by its Islamic heritage, and the recent Islamic resurgence has sought to re-emphasize, and even promote, its unity. However, this Islamic heritage has shaped these regions in diverse ways, just as colonialism and modernity had also impacted them in different ways. By the same token, the area known as the West has been influenced by its shared heritage and efforts are being made to promote unity among its diverse components. However, Western states have fought more wars against each other than against outsiders, including Muslims, while millions of Muslims have been enlisted to fight in these Western wars, and on both sides.

The tendency towards abstraction and idealization of identities can in turn produce intense insecurities that generate self-sustaining conflict. This can in turn obscure the real causes of conflict. For example, the search for a (usually one-sided) religious justification for conflicts involving Muslims and others has a long pedigree, dating back to works

<sup>16</sup> Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, *Towards an Islamic Reformation: Civil liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

such W.W. Hunter's *Indian Muslims: Are They Bound by Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (1871), a tome replete with 'European stereotypes about the rebellious nature of Islam, Muslim fanaticism and the political threat of Pan-Islamism'.<sup>17</sup> More recently, views seeing the roots of conflict with Muslims in a 'rage' emanating from Muslim frustration with modernity<sup>18</sup> have been gaining support well beyond the Islamophobic fringe. This line of thinking, most recently expressed in official attacks on multiculturalism, largely misses the point. The questions Hunter and his successors ask would have been relevant if Muslims did *not* rebel against colonial domination. By the same token, it would be a mistake to argue that inter-faith dialogue (usually commendable in its own right) would be the key to resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

No less significant is the fact that Western nations have not lived up to their democratic or humanist pretensions either, especially when they encountered Muslims. From the time Napoleon marched into Egypt in 1798, preaching liberty and doing something different, to the time when Bush did a repeat in Iraq in 2003, Western democratic norms have been honoured more in the breach, and not only in colonized countries. As Juan Cole put it succinctly when comparing Bush's Iraq adventure with that of the more illustrious Western figure:

The French general and the American president do not much resemble one another – except perhaps in the way the prospect of conquest in the Middle East appears to have put fire in their veins and in their unappealing tendency to believe their own propaganda (or at least to keep repeating it long after it became completely implausible). Both leaders invaded and occupied a major Arabic-speaking Muslim country; both harbored dreams of a 'Greater Middle East'; both were surprised to find themselves enmeshed in long, bitter, debilitating guerrilla wars. Neither genuinely cared about grassroots democracy, but both found its symbols easy to invoke for gullible domestic publics. Substantial numbers of their new subjects quickly saw, however, that they faced occupations, not liberations.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2005), p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> See Bernard Lewis, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990), pp. 48–54; Ervand Abrahamian, 'The US Media, Huntington and September 11', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24/3, (2003), pp. 529–44.

<sup>19</sup> Juan Cole, 'Bush's Napoleonic Folly', *The Nation*, 10 September 2007, at: [www.thenation.com/article/bushs-napoleonic-folly](http://www.thenation.com/article/bushs-napoleonic-folly) (accessed 7 July 2011); cf. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, 'Political Culture and the Crisis of Democracy in the Arab World', in Elbadawi, Ibrahim and Makdisi, Samir (eds.), *Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 11–40.

It would appear, therefore, that very often when the 'West' and 'Islam' clash, it is not always because one side is 'Islamic' and the other 'Western' in ideal-typical fashion. Rather, it is most frequently the reverse. Saddam Hussein was not the best advertisement of Islamic values (or any values for that matter), nor was George W. Bush the pride of 'Western civilization', if indeed such did exist. The same can be said about skinheads and other Islamophobic bullies who claim to be manning the barricades against the Islamic hordes preparing to storm the 'West'.

## 5. Conclusion

Like the insecurities they provoke regarding an 'Islamic threat' to the West, the sense of insecurity promoted by Islamic radicals claiming that Islam is under attack from the West is underpinned by a complex web of modern constructs. Not only are many of the identities around which most of these conflicts revolve – such as Palestinian, Pakistani, Iraqi, Iranian, etc. – thoroughly modern designations (in fact, the designation 'Muslim' for Bosnians who are neither Serb nor Croat was proposed by the communist authorities in Yugoslavia to skirt around the complex ethnic contests in that republic), but, in addition, even apparently 'authentic' alternative designations are also modern constructs. For example, some radical groups advocating the revival of the caliphate paint an idealized, and largely fictional, picture of a glorious and continually existing caliphate which was abolished by Atatürk in 1924!

These constructs magnify insecurity and generate new insecurities precisely because the identities they claim to seek to protect no longer exist. In strictly religious terms, the security of the believer is inviolable. As a gift from God, this security can be withdrawn only by Him. In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Ludwig Wittgenstein questioned the meaningfulness of the expression that 'we feel safe in the hands of God', even though he acknowledges that it is an allegory or a simile that refers to a genuine 'experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say, "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens."' <sup>20</sup>

Genuine faith surely entails such a serenity, a sense of being safe under God's eyes, whatever happens. It should help eliminate deep anxiety and insecurity, and the agitation associated with them. However, the vast majority of Muslims (and followers of other faiths as well) are not saints, and most would not reflect on their daily experiences from a religious

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74/1 (January 1965), pp. 3–12.

or spiritual perspective. A group of young Muslim men confronted by racist taunts while walking through a council estate (probably to or from a disco) are not likely to say: 'Let us feel spiritually superior; let us turn the other cheek.' Similarly, a young Palestinian man humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint while on his way to work for a pittance at an Israeli farm that probably once belonged to his family is not likely to be in a mood of spiritual high-mindedness. If he were, that would be *the* true miracle of faith.

There are indeed exhortations in the Quran for the believers to repay aggression with kindness.

But [since] good and evil cannot be equal, repel thou [evil] with something that is better and lo! he between whom and thyself was enmity [may then become] as though he had [always] been close [unto thee], a true friend; Yet [to achieve] this is not given to any but those who are wont to be patient in adversity: it is not given to any but those endowed with the greatest good fortune.

(Quran, 34:35)

But since those with 'the greatest good fortune' among us do not happen to be in the majority, it might be a safer bet to think of Plan B, and get people into conversation about grievances and wrongs. Securing a more just system is usually easier than resolving injustice. A closer examination of instances where religious difference is seen as the source of a security threat very quickly reveals additional layers of grievances and divergences. It is an accepted truism that the Catholic/Protestant dichotomy in Northern Ireland is not the primary source of conflict, even though both sides deploy sectarian religious rhetoric as weapons in this conflict. For if religion were the prime mover, then Britain should be at war with France and Spain as well. By the same token, being Sunni or Shi'i in Bahrain or Iraq is not, in itself, the cause of conflict, but it becomes a factor when the sectarian affiliation is used as the basis of discrimination. In this regard, while inter-faith dialogue is important in such contexts, it becomes pointless unless the real problems (those of discrimination and exclusion) are addressed.

In this regard, habitual inter-faith dialogue needs to be examined critically. I once politely declined an invitation to join an inter-faith dialogue forum, pointing out that in my experience of inter-faith dialogue it is usually neither a dialogue nor is it about faith. It is not about faith because those engaged wisely avoid discussing religion; for if they did begin to discuss religion, war would break out there and then. But they also avoid discussing the real issues that divide them, because that would be straying into politics, which should be left alone. Thus a Jewish/Muslim

inter-faith conversation would not want to get into what Jews thought of Islam and vice versa; but it would be even wiser to avoid discussing Israel as well, for the meeting would be even shorter then.

Time for a rethink? Perhaps.

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