

Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

Islam and Violence: When “From Within” Meets “From Without”

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Violence is the perennial problem of our species and is in no way specific to one religion, ideology, or culture. A quick look at any history book would make this blindingly evident. It is also true that under specific circumstances the use of violence escalates among certain human collectivities. At this point in history particularly Muslims appear to be subject to this problem as evinced by the emergence of many militant and terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, ISIL, Boko Haram and the escalation of sectarian violence between the Shi'a and the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria.

Why is this happening? The answer is a complex one. There are many external and internal factors involved in the process. When these factors meet, a tendency towards violence emerges with a particular clarity. Realizing the complexity of the problem might be the crucially important first step towards a solution.

Political and Economic Real/Perceived Grievances

From the very early stages of Islamic history, Muslims were able to establish communities that were economically prosperous, intellectually vibrant, scientifically and artistically productive, and militarily powerful. However, as a quick look at the political and economic history of the Islamic world in the last few centuries reveals, they have been suffering from, what one might call, a “civilizational crisis” and as a result of this, real grievances. Colonialism, unending military coups, authoritarian and oppressive regimes, the situation of Palestinians in Israel, ghettoization, ostracization and institutionalized discrimination against Muslim minorities in some European countries, identity issues among immigrant communities, continuing demoni-

zation of Islam in the global media, and high unemployment rates are but just a few examples.

These ingrained problems, in some cases, instill a profound sense of pessimism and discontent in that a meaningful solution does not exist within the boundaries of the dominant global political and economic structure and, thus, one must step outside of it and resort to violence in order to offer some real change.

This sentiment is quite evident in the martyrdom videos where the perpetrator expresses him/herself in religious language and typically reads a passage from the Qur'an, but the bulk of his remarks revolve around political and economic grievances of Muslims around the globe. The perpetrator does not go from the text to the world but from the world to the text and finds, often after a selective reading, justification and complicity for the intended act of violence. This exegetical strategy might make the act a religious one in expression but, obviously, not in motivation.

The Undercurrents of Islamic Tradition

One can differentiate between “Islam” as it is in itself in the fundamental source/s and “Islamic tradition” as a man-made interpretation. Here Islam implies an inexhaustible source of inspiration for a believer and Islamic tradition implies an appropriation and thus limitation of Islam. This distinction attributes a perfection to Islam, as it is in itself, and imperfection to Islamic tradition as a production of the interaction of the human mind and the fundamental source/s of the religion.

With this caveat in mind one can say that some aspects

of Islamic tradition reflects the rigidity and exclusivity of the belligerent medieval environments in which it is formulated. Blasphemy law is one such issue. Persons accused of blasphemy are punishable by death according to most jurisprudential schools in Islam. Such laws give political authority a religious justification to silence any opposition. This is, by the way, not unique to Islamic tradition, for no part of the world was liberal and democratic enough to tolerate such challenges to the established creed and norms. Thus, major religions of the world had conceived blasphemy as a major threat to the religious and societal order and consequently considered it as a capital crime.

This and similar traditional undercurrents of Islamic tradition, however comprehensible they may be in their own context, can be and are used to justify the use of violence by extremists. Here one discerns the need that Islamic scholarship must be critical enough to reevaluate such strands of the tradition and adopt it more selectively. They could marginalize some aspects of it and popularize some others. These injunctions regarding blasphemy and apostasy reflect the values and needs of medieval political context and are no longer applicable. The world is increasingly interdependent and intertwined and such isolatory attempts cannot be afforded. One can believe that the preceding Muslim generations, generally speaking, did an admirable job in appropriating the divine message in their specific context and thus object to wholesale rejection of it. But all this appreciation need not preclude us from seeing the dangers of some Muslims' tendency to transfer it to modern context unselectively.

A question arises here. What explains this limited yet concerning tendency towards uncritical and unselective adoption of Islamic tradition? This brings us to the question of religious education and illiteracy.

Religious Illiteracy

Researches on Muslim perpetrators of the terrorist attacks since 9/11 reveal a rather interesting typology. The significant portion of these activists have been young, self-taught, non-observant, or, like the two brothers in the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, recent "born again" Muslims and, or, as in the attack on Canadian parliament, new converts. The unifying characteristic of the activists is that they did not receive a formal or traditional Islamic education.

The perpetrators may be claiming to be acting in the name of Islam but they certainly lack sufficient knowledge to extract the message of Islam from its fundamental sources for a specific issue. This would require a comprehensive vision of the fundamental sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition (Sunna) that can only be attained after years of intense study because of the immense amount of knowledge; and mastery of certain languages, especially Arabic, to be able to engage with both the fundamental sources and the writings of the preceding scholarship. This certainly requires a life long dedication and these young wannabe jihadists do not seem to have neither patience nor intention to master this immense amount of knowledge. Motivated not by an informed perspective of Islam but by the above mentioned political and economic grievances of the global Muslim community, and driven by intense discontent and pessimism, they appear to be reading their anger and nihilism into the Qur'an and the Sunna with the help of their religious illiteracy.

Religious Puritanism

To a certain extent religious illiteracy together with political and economic grievances explain the escalation of the use of violence among Muslims at this point in history. However, the situation seems to be more complicated than this, because we also observe that a number of well-educated scholars also lend support to the terroristic use of violence within and without the Muslim community. How do we explain this phenomenon?

Most of the major Muslim revivalist movements that have emerged in the last few centuries argue that the fundamental problem that led to the decline of Islamic civilization is the adulteration of the pristine message of Islam. This pure message had been successfully understood and represented by the first few generations, but the following generations gradually departed from it. Especially during their encounter with Greek and Hindu cultures they have injected foreign influence and "corrupted" Islamic teachings. Departing from this diagnosis a segment of the global Muslim community developed a sort of religious puritanism with a sense of dissatisfaction and, even, contempt towards the intellectual and spiritual accumulation of the Islamic tradition. In some cases this sentiment led to such extremities as total rejection of the Islamic tradition.

Obviously, this methodology leaves one alone before the text. This is, from one perspective, a liberating move, for it absolves one from the limitations of the tradition; but from another perspective it might and does lead to an arbitrary reading of the text by unqualified freelancers such as Usama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadî without having to concern what the preceding scholarship has to say about any given issue. Herein one can offer highly unorthodox violent interpretations.

Aside from the fact that the claim that “everybody-got-it-wrong-but-me” mentality and resulting total rejection of Islamic tradition imply a profound hubris, this methodology precludes one from benefiting from the accumulation of Islamic scholarship whose conclusions, I would argue, are more humanistic and inclusivist than its modern discontents. This particular attitude, call it Jihadi Salafism or Islamic puritanism or Wahhabism, is another factor that paves the way for reading the global Muslim dissatisfaction into the fundamental sources.

Intolerant Sectarianism

Undermining the value of the rich history and intellectual and spiritual vibrancy of Islamic tradition has a further conclusion: intolerant sectarianism. Namely that Islamic civilization, as its resistance to religious schisms suggests, was able to tolerate the divergences of opinion within a larger hermeneutical structure. The multiplicity of jurisprudential schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, Shafi, Jafari etc.) and theological schools (Ash'ari, Ma'turidi, Salafi, Mu'tazili, etc.) has been conceived as legitimate expressions of Islam.

Traditional Islamic pluralism, however, has been largely damaged by the global rise of Islamic puritanism because of its obsession with a utopic past and resulting uncommon wholesale rejection of Islamic tradition and, hence, the diversification of religious interpretations throughout centuries. It therefore ends in a deep sense of intolerant sectarianism that is one of the major sources of intra-faith violence among Muslims in Iraq and Syria.

Some interpretations within a religion are more prone to produce violence than others. While not extremism per se, Islamic puritanism provides an outlook in that sectarian violence can develop.

Imperfect Ideas of Modernity

I also want to touch on another factor that, as John Gray, Karen Armstrong, and Brian Catlos have already observed, led to the escalation of the use of violence among Muslims: The uncritical adoption of some of the ideas advanced and popularized by modernity like nationalism and militant Marxism. These ideas prove rather destabilizing and harmful when they are applied in a Muslim context.

Nationalism, that is perceived as a symbol of European modernity and prosperity, led to the replacement of traditional forms of political organizations with nation states. It consequently disturbed the delicate balance between the ruling class and the scholars ('ulamâ), on the one hand, and led to further polarization in Muslim societies on the other.

In a traditional Muslim society we see a labor division between the class of scholars and rulers. The class of scholars, although not entirely independent of political structure, functioned in a relatively free civil domain. While the ruler were promulgating the 'ulamâ were codifying it. The relative success of traditional Islamic civilization in differentiating the role of the 'ulamâ and the ruler proved quite efficient. The class of 'ulamâ had managed to maintain a sort of check and balance system against the arbitrariness of the ruler. This explains why Islamic civilization is compared favorably to other parts of the world during the medieval period as it pertains to the rule of law and political stability.

With the adoption of nation state model in the 20th century this structure has dissolved. Now in many Muslim countries the class of 'ulamâ cannot function without taking the interest of political structure into consideration. For a nation state envisages a shorter distance between the state and the citizen, that would also mean a closer surveillance on the class of 'ulamâ. Therefore what people hear from religious elite is usually a highly politicized version of Islam. The politicization of Islam in the hands of the 'ulama discredited them in the public eye. Religious extremism benefited from this vacuum left by the class of 'ulama.

From another perspective the state boundaries in the Middle East, mostly drawn after World War I, were quite arbitrary that ethnic groups remained in different states. The new states were actually so hete-

rogeneous that it was well nigh impossible to create a strong national spirit despite the willingness of the states to resort to oppression to realize this goal. These ethnic groups under the influence of nationalism wanting to have their own country remained in a state of tension which in some cases, like Kurds in Turkey, led to armed conflict.

Marxism, especially violent revolution strategies of Marxist terrorist organizations, seem to have been assimilated by Muslim extremists as well. Suicide bombing was invented by Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka who had very little time for religion. In 80s and 90s suicide bombing had gradually been adopted in Lebanon and Palestine first by secularist and socialists activists and subsequently by such Islamist organizations as Hamas and eventually al-Qaeda.

Looking at the influence of modern secular ideologies on Islamic terrorism one can argue that Islamic extremism emerges at the meeting point of imperfect ideas of modernism and problematic aspects of Islamic tradition.

Conclusion

At the core of Islam, like other great world religions, is the message of goodness, beauty and compassion

for it teaches that the world is a creation/manifestation of an Absolute Being whose essential qualities are goodness, beauty, and compassion and one must assimilate these qualities as much as this is humanly possible.

The undeniable escalation of violence among the contemporary Muslims is, then, not an essential but an accidental problem. It can be attributed to both external and internal problems such as the real/perceived ingrained political and economic grievances of the global Muslim community, widespread pessimism and discontent among Muslims due to these grivance, unselective transfer of some of the violent undercurrents of Islamic tradition, religious illiteracy, religious puritanism, intolerant sectarianism, the dissolution of traditional socio-political structures, and the adoption of such problematic ideas of modernity as nationalism and militant Marxism.

Perhaps the best approach for us, as Muslims, is to accept that in the face of these enormous problems a short term solution does not exist. There could be, however, long term solutions that might take decades of diligent work both on the practical and theoretical level. Realization of the complexity of the problem together with its external and internal sources might be the most important first step in this long journey.

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