

Muslims in the US (I)

Asma Barlas

(This is an edited transcript of a talk that Dr. Barlas gave at a forum organized by the Strategic Research Foundation on May 24 in California and will be published in two parts).

At the outset, I should mention that some of what I will say today I've had occasion to say before at a forum at Cornell quite aptly titled "Homeland Insecurity," and at a conference on "Islam in America" held at Harvard earlier this year.

As a way to situate myself, I want to note that I am a first generation immigrant from Pakistan who now finds herself positioned within, and sometimes between, two overlapping and yet exclusively defined communities: the émigré Muslim on the one hand and the US on the other. It is partly this location that has shaped my perspective on some of the issues that I will be speaking about.

In large measure, however, my views—specially the belief that the way in which most Muslims practice Islam actually subverts and undermines its teachings—originate in a specific reading of the Qur'an that I've offered in my recent book, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (University of Texas, 2002).

Muslims in America face many challenges these days but I will focus primarily on two: the fall-out of 9/11 and unequal gender relationships in our communities. These may appear to be unrelated, but if we are to confront external challenges, our communities must be internally strong and healthy, and I can't imagine how they can be so long as they are founded on inegalitarian gender hierarchies.

I will speak first about some of the implications of 9/11 for Muslims and then about the need to put our own house in order.

By now, it should be clear that this administration and its neoconservative ideologues are using 9/11 as a pretext for establishing US global hegemony by whatever means necessary. Abroad, this has entailed wantonly killing thousands of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq and setting up military bases in Muslim heartlands in the Middle East and Central Asia.

At home, it has involved a systematic and ever widening attack on civil liberties that includes racial profiling, surveillance, preemptive arrests and detentions, secret courts, and the denial of legal rights not only to those accused of terrorism, but also those suspected of harboring hostile intent towards the US. Such measures are directed almost entirely at Muslims and Arabs who also are under assault by segments of civil society.

In addition to the governmental crackdown and vigilante violence, Muslim and Arab academics—and critics of this administration generally—also are being attacked by

reactionary watchdog groups some of which now equate “hatred” for the US and “anti-Americanism” with criticisms of the *Israeli* government!

Most people view this as a natural or inevitable fallout of 9/11, but a tragedy, of whatever proportions, doesn't dictate its own response. My own view is that 9/11 merely brought to the surface the latent Western fear and suspicion of Muslims that dates back to the very advent of Islam. It is this preexisting hostility that explains the ease with which this administration was able to launch its attack on Muslims after 9/11 and why it has been able to hold us all hostage for the actions of a few without much in the way of a public questioning of its policies.

Of course, other “minorities” have also had to contend with this way of apportioning collective responsibility—like the Japanese during World War II—but such exceptional treatment is reserved only for some of us and not all of us. Certainly, we don't blame all Jews, much less Judaism itself, for the terrorism unleashed by extremist Jewish groups against Arab civilians in the 1930s and '40s. Nor do we hold all white people responsible for the crimes of the many. Indeed, white people have always been able to claim uniquely individualized identities that free them from having to shoulder collective responsibility; thus Hitler remains Hitler and Timothy McVeigh Timothy McVeigh; neither is taken to exemplify white criminality.

But Muslims and Arabs cannot claim individuality because they are branded with the “mark of the plural,” as Albert Memmi called it, and while Memmi was referring to French colonialist representations of Tunisians (who are Muslims and Arabs), what he says of the French is no less true of US-American attitudes towards Muslims today.

Like the colonizers, most non-Muslim Americans also believe of Muslims that “‘They are unpredictable!’ ‘With them, you never know!’” And, like the colonized, Muslims also are “never characterized in an individual manner; [they are] entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same.’).” And, just like the humanity of the colonized remains opaque and “mysterious after years of living with the colonizer,” so does the humanity of Muslims after centuries of living with non-Muslim Americans (quotations from Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Boston: Beacon, 1991).

It is against this collective anonymity and unknowability that we are having to struggle today; after all, if non-Muslim Americans had been able to see us in the ordinariness and averageness of our lives, why would we need to explain these lives to them today?

It is also this sense of Muslims as unpredictable, unknowable, and all the same that has dictated the US response to 9/11, including the attack on civil liberties. Indeed, it isn't accidental that this assault has assumed the form of an attack on the Muslim “Other.” Framed in this way, the attack appears as a trade-off to most people who agree to give up some of their rights—or don't protest too much when those rights are taken away from them—if it means depriving the dreaded Muslims of most or all of **their** rights.

That such a situation can even appear as a trade-off reveals the extent to which most US-Americans can't see any commonalities between themselves and Muslims, and as a result, also can't see that what they're allowing to happen to Muslims today may happen to them tomorrow. After all, once a law is on the books, it can target everyone equally.

(To be continued).