

Islam, the Middle East, and Terrorism: What we Are and Aren't Talking About.

(Text of talk given at Ithaca College, November 8th)

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Professor Naeem Inayatullah has asked me to speak to you about Middle East politics, in particular, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and also a little bit about Islam.

Understanding Middle East politics

It takes me an entire semester to teach a course on Middle East politics and, even then, I feel we've only just skimmed the surface. At best, then, I can only do a "quick and dirty" overview of some of those issues that might interest a class studying terrorism.

I want to begin by saying something about how people are talking about the Middle East and Arabs, and Muslims, and Islam more generally in the US right now.

One of the things we're hearing is that the US war on terrorism is not a war on Islam. But as Robert Fisk, a well-known journalist, asks: "If the US attacks were an assault on 'civilisation,' why shouldn't Muslims regard the Afghanistan attack as a war on Islam?"

We're also hearing that Muslims hate the US not because of its policies vis-à-vis Muslim states but of a generic and visceral rage they feel. As Thomas Friedman explains it in his piece, "Fighting bin Ladenism" (New York Times, November 6th):

"Arab regimes fail to build a real future for their people. This triggers seething anger. Their young people who can get visas escape overseas. Those who can't turn to the mosque and Islam to protest. The regimes crush the violent Muslim protesters, but to avoid being accused of being anti-Muslim the regimes give money and free rein to their most hard-line, but nonviolent, Moslem clerics, while also redirecting their public's anger onto America through their press. Result: America ends up being hated and Islam gets handed over to the most anti-modern forces. Have a nice day."

This may sound like a nice analysis, but apart from being catastrophically simple-minded, it doesn't explain why Middle Eastern regimes haven't been able to build a future for their people, and why they nonetheless continue to remain in power

even though they are detested by their own people.

There really is no way to answer this question without examining US foreign policies that help to keep corrupt regimes in power all across the world so long as they continue to provide the US easy access to their resources and markets. But notice our hesitation in discussing US foreign policies at all, even at this critical political juncture.

Could this be because we really don't care what happens overseas as Geov Parrish (ZNET) claims? As he says,

“Seven and a half million people [are] at risk of dying in a matter of months. That's three times the number of people Pol Pot took years to kill. Thirty-five times the number that died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, combined. If 5,000 died on September 11 . . .we're talking the equivalent number of deaths to ten World Trade Centers, every day, for 150 days. Slow, painful deaths. Entirely avoidable deaths. Deaths whose sole cause is not the United States, but most of which can still be prevented except that the United States is refusing to allow them to be prevented. It repulses me to say this, but I suspect a lot of Americans don't care.”

It is this sort of disregard for the rest of the world and also a failure to take responsibility for our actions that fuels much of the opposition to the US today.

Speaking of the US bombing of Afghanistan, Egyptian novelist, Ahdaf Soueif (Guardian, November 6th) says that Muslims are angered not so much by the fact that Afghanistan is a Muslim country, as by their

“perception that the Afghan people have been used and abused for more than 20 years. Everyone is aware of the responsibility of the US in creating the circumstances for the appearance of the Taliban, who are then pointed at as proof of the backwardness of Islam in general. Yet Afghanistan, before the Russian invasion, was finding its own way towards modernity; otherwise, how come there are so many Afghan women professionals in the opposition camped up north?”

Notice, however, that we haven't had a public dialogue about US policies in creating the Taliban or the advisability of destroying the Afghan people; all we're doing is polling people on whether or not we should destroy the terrorists before they destroy us. Put that way, it's hard to say that we shouldn't.

This is the general background against which we should also understand the world's outrage at what is happening in Palestine today.

Since I won't be able to speak about the Arab-Israeli conflict in much detail, I'd like to suggest that you watch Marty Rosenbluth's film, "Jerusalem: An Occupation Set in Stone?" which will be shown in Textor 101 at 7:30 next Monday (November 12th). This documentary won the Lindheim Award at the Judah L. Magnes Museum's Jewish Video Festival and Rosenbluth is Amnesty International USA's country specialist on Israel. He will be speaking after the showing of the film.

Israeli-Arab conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict dates from the early years of 20th century when European Jews, who were suffering virulent anti-Semitism at the hands of other Europeans, launched the political movement known as Zionism that called for Jewish immigration back to Palestine. The Jews had lived in Palestine 3000 years ago and they believe that God gave them this land but very early in their history, they were exiled from it following its conquest by other groups.

In 1914, a notable Zionist leader, Chaim Weizman, coined a term for this Jewish return: "A land without people, for a people without land."

Palestine, however, was not a land without people and the people who lived there had entered it about the same time as the Jews initially had: around the "twelfth century before the Christian era" (Smith, 1992:1). These people had remained in Palestine while the Jews were in exile and while they did not initially resent the return of some Jews to Palestine, in time their opposition to Jewish immigration grew.

In 1919, the British, who had taken over control of Palestine from the Muslim Ottoman Empire after World War I, promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine. The same year, the US based King-Crane Commission to Palestine found that 90% of the people were opposed to setting up a Jewish state and that such a state could only be established by gross violations of people's civil rights and their dispossession.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, there were armed conflicts between the Arabs and the Jews, but in 1948, the UN eventually partitioned Palestine and declared the state of Israel.

In the aftermath of Israel's establishment, thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their homes and there also were a number of wars between the new state and its Arab neighbors. Each war allowed Israel to capture more territory and to expand its original borders.

The international community has never accepted Israeli occupation as legal and

the UN has been calling for withdrawal from all occupied territories since the 1960s and 1970s by way of two resolutions: 242 and 338.

Israel, however, continues to retain control of many areas, including the West Bank, Gaza strip, and Jerusalem.

For the last half a century, Palestinians have been forced to live in refugee camps under Israeli occupation and it is in the campus that the intifada, or resistance movement, first emerged in the 1980s. We are currently witnessing the second phase of this movement. The Palestinians are demanding a state of their own and an end to Israeli occupation, as well as the right of the refugees to return to their homes.

This is not, however, a religious war. Palestinians are both Christians and Muslims and some of the strongest advocates of Palestinian nationalism, like Edward Said and Hanan Ashrawi, are Christians, as was George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine, which was responsible for some terrorist acts.

We have, however, begun to give this struggle the image of a religious war because of the emergence of something known as the suicide bomber. Many of these bombers belong to Hamas, an ultra-right Muslim party that Israel itself backed during its early years as a counterpoint to Yasser Arafat's PLO.

Terrorists and Bombers

The Muslim suicide bomber is a new phenomenon in Middle East politics, but the suicide bomber himself is not a new phenomenon, nor is terrorism in the Middle East.

Recall the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II. But, not only did we not call them terrorists (because they were in the service of a state) but we haven't spent much energy trying to figure out if the Shinto religion makes for violence and suicide bombers.

But, today the Muslim suicide bomber is being represented as a peculiarly "Islamic" phenomenon and we seem to be becoming more and more obsessed with him.

It may be that, as the philosopher Slavoj Zizek (September 17th) says, we are surprised that "people have such a disregard for their own lives." But, he wonders, is the "obverse of this surprise [not] the rather sad fact that we, in the First World countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one's life?"

I should also note another historical fact: Jewish groups introduced terrorism into the Middle East. In 1946, Menachem Begin (the former Israeli prime minister and one of the recipients of the Nobel peace prize) blew up the King David Hotel, which was full of British troops and nurses, in an attempt to force British withdrawal from Palestine. Two years later, his Irgun massacred “250 men, women and children” in Deir Yassin and stuffed their “mutilated bodies . . . down wells” (Smith, 143).

Similarly, the Stern gang and the Hagana introduced the practice of bombing “gathering places [and] crowded Arab areas [in an attempt to] terrorize the Arab community” (19; 140). The Stern gang even attacked Jewish banks, resulting in “Jewish loss of life.”

This doesn't mean that I'm saying that because some Jewish groups introduced terrorism into the Middle East that some Muslim groups are justified in their terrorism today. It is simply to set the historical record straight and to raise the possibility that one person's terrorist may be another person's freedom fighter; depends on who is doing the naming.

I want now to shift gears and personalize this discussion a little bit.

Situating myself and my audience

I'm a practicing Muslim, but I don't put myself in any of the categories that commonly are used here to describe Muslims: moderate, fundamentalist, radical, conservative, modernist, humanist, Islamist, traditionalist, secular, etc.

First, identities aren't “pure” types into which people can neatly slot themselves and I suspect that all of these elements are present in different ways and to different degrees in how many Muslims think about Islam and their own identities.

Second, I don't find many of these categories meaningful. For example, I find the word “Islamist” nonsensical since it's like calling a Christian a Christianist or a Jew a Judaist.

I like to distinguish between Islam and Muslims since one is a religion and the other someone who claims to practice it. Just as we would not confuse Christianity with actual Christians—because some Christians may not even believe in God and may not practice their faith—we also should not confuse Islam with Muslims or reduce Muslims to Islam.

I should also note that while I'm Muslim, I'm not Palestinian, or Arab, or Afghan, or even from the Middle East. I say this because of the tendency to think of all Muslims as Arabs or as being from the Middle East.

Having introduced myself somewhat, I want now to speculate on why you're here and what your interest in Islam or Muslims or terrorism is.

I suspect many of you are wanting to look beyond the explanations that public leaders and the media have offered for the events of 9/11. I say this because if—like Lisa and Bart Simpson—you regarded your TV as your primary caregiver and news source, you'd be at home, watching it rather than sitting here.

On the other hand, I suspect others of you are here because you've already made up your minds about events and want merely to be reaffirmed in your views.

I'm sure some of you are here because you're confused and frustrated because you don't know how to sort through what you're hearing, and you don't know what to think.

And, then, I've heard that some of you are here because you wanted a one-credit course!

Now regardless of why you're here or how open-minded you really are, here's something I think we need to talk about: is it true, as many people these days are saying, that to try and explain 9/11, specially as an unintended consequence of some aspect of US foreign policies, is to justify the attacks of 9/11 and therefore blaming the victim?

“Blaming the victim”

To help our dialogue, let me state my own views: I believe this is a pretext for shutting off dialogue and self-critique while pretending to occupy a high moral position.

I say pretending because we habitually do blame the victim here. Consider how many of us justify rape by saying the rape victim “had it coming” because of how they were behaving or dressed. Consider how we justify poverty by saying that the poor (who usually are the “minorities”) are quite happy living in ghettos, aren't hard-working, and know no better. Consider how we justify the deaths of 5000 Iraqi children a month brought about by US sanctions by saying that Saddam Hussain is responsible for them. Consider how we are justifying the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan as a result of US bombing by saying the Taliban are responsible for those. Consider how Israel justifies the killing of Palestinian youth by saying that Yasser Arafat is responsible for them.

Clearly, most people have no problem blaming the victim so long as that person is poor, a minority, a foreigner, a woman, a gay man, a Muslim, a Palestinian, an Iraqi, an Afghan, or whatever. They only have a problem where it comes to taking

some blame themselves!

I want to suggest that it is this double standard and sense of denial that leads us to offer, and to accept, explanations of 9/11 and of world politics that not only are patently false but which are likely to generate even more misunderstandings and confusions in the US about the rest of the world.

Notice I said “in the US about the rest of the world” and not “mutual misunderstandings between the US and the world.” I say this because, under ordinary circumstances, US citizens live as if there were no “rest of the world.” They therefore know very little about it and they care even less about what happens in it or to it; until, of course, they begin to realize that what happens “there” is likely at some point to effect them “here.”

I think 9/11 showed that we don't live in separate worlds; we live in one. And, as I've had occasion to say before, it is insolent to assume that we can remain pristinely safe in a world of terror and injustice, much of which our own policies have helped to create.