

Wanton violence in *Muslimdom*:  
*Religious imperative or spiritual deviation?*<sup>1</sup>  
by  
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DESPITE WHAT HAS unfolded in the aftermath of events such as 9/11 and 7/7, it should be clear from the outset that ‘violence’ is not specifically a Muslim problem. On the contrary, as Muslim propagandists never cease to point out – *ad nauseum* – historically, non-Muslim perpetrators of wanton destruction leave Muslim terrorists in their proverbial dust.

This is, however, not the point.

Historically, it has seldom been the case with the erudite of the Muslim community that they would continually point the finger of blame at non-Muslims. The current mantras of ‘Islam is peace’ and similar others have become trite in their repetition, and it is a curious departure from how previous Muslim communities faced their problems. Scholars of the past did not hesitate to engage in pointed self-criticism: that delicate censure that the Muslim tradition calls *muhasaba*. That type of reflection has been unusually limited by a number of recent writers to cover deep spiritual woes and resulting traumas. Yet, *muhasaba* is a tool by which all kinds of abnormal phenomena are examined, and expunged.

A recent article in a British publication denounced the existence of ‘moderate Islam’ as a myth, asserting that although a majority of Muslims are non-violent, they are so only by treating the Qur’an as a ‘pick-and-mix selection’. The article’s subsequent analysis revealed a ‘unique’ methodology; picking and mixing not only the Qur’an but also the whole corpus of 14 centuries of Muslim scholarship in a decidedly selective fashion. It is ironic then that this is precisely the type of unqualified engagement radical ‘*Jihadists*’ (sic) enjoin.

The Muslim and the non-Muslim need to engage in a bit of *muhasaba* in this area, for this methodology is a type that ignores the measures in scholarship that generations of Muslim academic dons painstakingly took. Generations of academic sages have painstakingly taken the time, to articulate the finer points of practise, theology and spirituality, in an unbroken chain of academic intellectual inheritance (the Muslim alternative to an ecclesiastical hierarchy or Church), and it bears examining their way of thinking.

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly edited version of an article by the same title which appears in Aftab Ahmad Malik (Ed), *The State We Are In: Identity, Terror and the Law of Jihad* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006)

Classical thought:  
*Islamic Intellectual Inheritance on the deviation of modern radicals*

Fortunately for us, the contemporary inheritors of that tradition disavow gratuitous violence, encouraging constructive social contribution, but with the classical scholastic authority back to the elemental Prophetic community that ‘Jihadists’ and others lack. For a thousand years, this is how the classical tradition developed: in a spirit of scholarly inquiry, enjoying a plurality of opinions. In so doing, they were not unmoved by emotional or personal concerns, but they were not controlled by such traits; they were subordinate to the desire of honest scholastic scrutiny.

Shaykh Muhammad Afifi al-Akiti’s juristic verdict (*fatwa*) represents how a progeny of that classical tradition might engage with the current situation of Muslims. As a product of a thoroughly classical Muslim educational system, he does not limit himself to merely issuing an apologetic hymn, nor even a simple rebuttal of some of the poorly constructed ‘legal opinions’ that instigated the publication of this work.

Rather, it is a scholastic refutation of not just the conclusions (which are secondary in the framework of this tradition) but the very methodology of the ‘pick and mix’ style of the unqualified and the uncertified. As the author notes:

“[This is a] *fitna* (civil unrest) reeling this mercied *Umma* (community), day in and day out, which is partly caused by those who, wilfully or not, misunderstand the legal discussions of the chapter on warfare outside their proper contexts which have been used by them to justify their wrong actions.”

In responding to this internal *fitna* (civil unrest), the author thus identifies the points of Islamic law that have been misread or misinterpreted, and clarifies them with a pedagogic penetration that leaves little room for doubt for both the Muslim and the non-Muslim reader.

Without reluctance, the text elucidates the position of Islamic law on attacking non-combatants, and how any military engagement must take place through a lawfully recognised political authority – in other words, negating any kind of anarchy or vigilantism. This much is hardly a surprise to any student of classical Muslim jurisprudence, but the references are useful to understand the methodology employed reaching such a conclusion. Al-Akiti is not presenting his own ‘feeling’, but, rather, reflecting and reporting the intellectual inheritance he possesses through his education. That form of Muslim education represents the refinement and evolution of legal tradition more than a thousand years old.

However, perhaps one of the most useful parts of this portion of the verdict is its explanation of one of the most controversial issues in modern Muslim communities: the tactic of ‘martyrdom operations’ in general and in Palestine in particular.

For years, proponents of this method, regardless of the target, have employed the image of the ‘lone charger’ as justification; al-Akiti, referring directly to the source books of Islamic law, through the matrix of a classical education, dispels any confusion. Despite the passions surrounding the issue (universally evident whenever Palestine is discussed amongst Muslims), al-Akiti approaches the issues

without uncontrolled emotion or sentiment. He firmly distinguishes between the ‘lone charger’, who may be placing himself in jeopardy but is ultimately killed by the enemy or circumstances, and the ‘suicide-bomber’, who takes his own life. Al-Akita removes any legitimacy from the latter in an unequivocal fashion.

In so doing, he does not limit himself to the theoretical situation of targeting nameless categories of civilians, but identifies, clearly, Israeli men, women and children. Off-duty soldiers are, as al-Akita notes, considered as ‘non-combatants’, and thus out of bounds for attack.

A poignant question he poses:

“Why was this [type of operation] not done before 1994 [the first HAMAS bombing], and especially during the earlier wars, most of all during the **disasters**<sup>2</sup> of 1948 and 1967?”<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere he writes:

“Yes, we are one *Umma* [community] such that when one part of the macro-body is attacked somewhere, another part inevitably feels the pain.”

The use of his language leaves no uncertainty regarding his obvious concern for the people of Palestine, but in matters of what he regards to be the domain of sacred law, he can only permit sacred motivations of accuracy and precision. There is no pretence of piety under the guise of ‘defending one’s own’; there is only a firm engagement with the questions in the light of law, for this is a legal affair. Prior to this publication, no such writ of equivalent legal calibre could have been found in the English language, despite the urgency of addressing such a significant issue.

In his analysis of the relevant portions of classical jurisprudence in this area, al-Akita does not limit himself to these discussions, but opens (and closes) related issues that are incredibly pertinent to contemporary Muslims: the use of bombs, commentary on the Qur’anic verse (*ayah*) that refers to the killing of idolaters, collateral damage and the oft-cited different classifications of land in Muslim jurisprudence, *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*.

#### A community of purpose, or a community of schizophrenia: *Muslims in the ‘West’*

This last treatment leads us into a discussion on perhaps a far more pertinent issue to the Muslims of the ‘West’ than suicide bombing; the issue of ‘integration’. Muslims have long been demographic minorities in non-Muslim lands, but perhaps for the first time in history they are now viewed as the proverbial ‘fifth column’ – a proverbial cancer in Western societies. Empirically, this seems difficult to justify, and there has been fine research from a number of authors on the connection between European societies and Islam/Muslims going back centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the end of the first Arab-Israeli war (1948) that established the state of Israel and the war of 1967 that resulted in Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Sinai.

But more damaging is the sentiment amongst some Muslims that they themselves do not really belong in the 'West'; in other words, pockets of individuals in the Muslim community help foster this notion of estrangement and difference themselves. The impulse to regard oneself as separate, distinct and alienated from one's neighbours, seeking to ghettoise oneself: this is a reality for some and it is a divisive ideology of 'us' against 'them' which contemporary Western societies cannot accept without challenge.

Identity too must be restored to its traditional and classical place, which modernity seems to have entirely misunderstood. In the wake of this bewilderment, many Muslims in the 'West' have been left grappling with who they are and what they are.

Not content to satisfy the questioner only on the aspect of denouncing violence and rejecting other negative actions, al-Akiti takes on this concept of alienation, raised in the allegation he is responding to: the role and place for Muslims in the European Union. He notes:

“...they (Muslims) should as a practical matter remain in these countries (of the EU), and if applicable, learn to cure the schizophrenic cultural condition in which they may find themselves ñ whether of torn identity in their souls or of dissociation from the general society. If they cannot do so, but find instead that their surroundings are incompatible with the life they feel they must lead, then it is recommended for them to leave and reside in a Muslim state.”

There is no theoretical waffling, or inconsistency in his breakdown of the matter: Muslims should remain in these countries, but without suffering from a jumbled psychological condition.

#### Modern Muslims: *a failure of education and etiquette*

In the final examination of this verdict, there is the inescapable conclusion that it was written by someone who is deeply soaked in the tradition of Muslim scholarship. It is also hard to ignore that this richness and depth is lacking in many of Muslimdom's *madrasas*. The point behind this verdict is not the verdict itself, but rather the fact it is intellectually sound and juridically unassailable.

Al-Akiti emerges as a product of classical Muslim education; in this sense, he is not unique. Rather, he is a modern day continuation of the accomplished system that historically protected Muslim jurisprudence from fragmentation and divisive intellectual anarchy. If he is rare, then part of the explanation is down to his own brilliance, but the more pertinent factor to take into account is the failure of modern Muslim educational systems. That breakdown is what produces a popular Muslim discourse that does not have more like him.

One of the great thinkers of Islam in the 20th century identified the failures of modern Muslim communities as one deficiency: a lack of *adab* (manners and etiquette). In classical Muslim communities, it was understood as a matter of course that there was a certain etiquette to be observed when one approached the ritual prayer, an etiquette to be observed with other human beings, and an etiquette to be observed when drawing near to the Divine Essence.

Etiquette cannot be sacrificed on the altar of ‘pragmatism’ or ‘modernity’; our greatest victory is in upholding the highest standards of decency and integrity, for it was against those same standards that war is being waged. With forbearance, there remains an imperative duty; to renew and restore respect for the etiquette to be observed when approaching the classical tradition of this religion. Previous generations knew this before this one, and, indeed, it is needed now more than ever. A full engagement with tradition through the appropriate etiquette focuses the intellect in a manner that al-Akiti epitomizes, and reveals that the heritage of classical Islam may be more than adequate to the challenge of modernity. The contrary alternatives on the market at present invariably result in muddles and upheavals, the 7th of July being only one chaotic manifestation.

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