

## Religious Openings: The Taliban Collapse

The sight of Afghan Muslims dancing in the streets to celebrate the fall of the Taliban must have filled countless Muslims the world over with consternation. These forces of Jihad, divinely appointed to eliminate “the oppression” and topple the mighty American Satan – how could they collapse like the World Trade Center towers? And how come all these *Muslims* are dancing for joy at this catastrophic defeat of *Islam*’s heroes?

These unhappy spectators, men who watch and read the Muslim media, widely share sentiments like those repeatedly aired on al Jazeera: "Any young Muslim would be proud to be Osama bin Laden... America is the maker of terrorism and it is now tasting its own medicine." Most of these people sincerely believe that Osama and Islamic Jihad represents the forces of justice and truth, the enemies of oppression. The plain evidence of Muslims shouting for joy at the disintegration of the Taliban confronts them with painful new data. They are momentarily overwhelmed with the unintelligibility of their once neatly arranged, dualist universe. Note the silence of the Arab street.

The cherished vision has failed... catastrophically. Not only have the good guys lost, but they have lost in the most shameful and dishonorable way. And Muslims rejoice in their liberation by the American Satan. The very identities of all the key players – winners, losers, the good, bad, the oppressors and the oppressed – have lost the sharp simplicity of their now ruined narrative.

We must not underestimate the malleability of such moments. Most Westerners believe that religion is a permanent and unchangeable set of beliefs, and would rather think of Bin Laden and his brand of terrorism as “political”, with political and economic solutions. But religions are, in fact, vibrant belief systems in motion, capable of swift changes of direction and emphasis. And clearly, Islam is in motion in this age of quickening modernization over the globe. Indeed, one might venture to say that the latest vocal Islamic discontent comes from Muslims seeing themselves reflected in this rapidly sharpening global mirror of modernity’s media, and hating what they saw.

Oh Muslims...  
What are we in this world? . . .  
We are bloodied corpses,  
And our blood is being shed.  
Oh the honor of Islam,  
How that honor is being violated. . . .  
We strayed from the faith,  
And the world darkened for us.  
If the root dies,  
The branches and the leaves will die.

To listen to the enraged imagination of Arab and Muslim anti-modernism is to enter a world of towering shame, violent hatreds and ambitions, virulent antisemitism, and ubiquitous conspiracism. It behooves us to pay attention.

And paying attention offers more than merely an argument for a right-wing and widespread hostility and suspicion of Muslims today. It also offers chances to engage in real, constructive, consequential dialogues and exchanges with Muslims. These opportunities arise because such seemingly implacable religious passions have a recurring and profound vulnerability – disappointment. They always attach themselves to fantastic dreams of vengeance and vindication in world conquest, and they repeatedly fail (at great cost, of course). These moments of collapse represent important windows of opportunity.

Unattended, of course, the odds are that the old system will return – more conspiracies, more scenarios, more apocalyptic dates, more war-mongering and more scapegoating. The brief moment of doubt will close, replaced by the comfort of the familiar certainties of self-inflicted failure and the guilty pleasures of grotesque dreams of bloody vengeance and global dominion. If so, this becomes yet another episode of failed hope in a succession of ever-more desperate and ever-more violent hopes. The super-highway to hell is paved with the pride of those who would rather die than admit error. You can expect them to denounce the arrogance and bloodthirstiness of their enemies.

But each time one of these grandiose and violent hopes for imperial dominion fails (the last time, largely squandered, was in 1991), we have a brief moment to reach Muslims of good faith. Here we have a chance to undermine the self-defeating narrative that blames all troubles on the West and glorifies the most violent and destructive of Islamic heroes. There are the Muslims on all sides of such debacles who thought they were following the right path, who really did believe they were fighting oppression, and now, briefly, look at the folly of their own religious imperialism, see its corruptions, glimpse the insight that to free people, means allowing them to be free, not re-enslaving them to another elite that thrives on the poverty of the masses. In particular, the celebrations in Kaboul will strike deep in the heart of honest Muslims everywhere who know the meaning of living in a totalitarian religious state, who would gladly celebrate the fall of their regimes. These are the inhabitants of Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Pakistan, and last but not least, the Palestinians, first victims of their “liberators”’ terror.

These people look at the collapse of the Taliban in Afghanistan and say, if only *sotto voce*, “something is terribly wrong with our religion, that it can permit these haters of the human spirit to crush people – Muslims! – so ruthlessly in the name of Islam.” Such people are surely numerous, since among the over 1 billion Muslims in the world, the vast majority lives in societies where Muslim elites appropriate almost all the wealth (no matter how much comes in), and keep them in a permanent state of poverty. It doesn’t take a genius to figure these people want a change. But one has to look, listen, and protect those voices that can articulate these desires, because otherwise, the bullies will continue to rule ruthlessly, silence the voices of sanity, and dull the pain of their victims with the addictive drug of scapegoating – anti-Western, anti-modern, anti-Zionist.

Like a game of jump rope, religious phenomena go through cycles of expansion and contraction, rising outward in hope and falling inward in disappointment. If we can offer

hope in new directions at the right moment, we may be able to at once jump in the game and turn it from the life-negating destructiveness of demonizing and scapegoating to the challenging task of a global culture in which nations can live in peace and freedom. Not to believe that Arabs and Muslims are capable of realizing the advantages and challenges of societies that do not crush their commoners, is a subtle form of racism. Not to understand that this has yet to be solidly accomplished anywhere in the Arab or Muslim world, is a subtle form of stupidity. We can afford neither.

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