

Reflections of an Algerian Moslem

*The September 11 Attacks and Their Historical Significance
in the Fight against Terrorism*

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Misconceptions about Algeria's decade-long fight against terrorism and about Islam have led to unnecessary human losses and to wrong policy conclusions in different parts of the world before and to a lesser extent after September 11, 2001. I hope some personal thoughts of mine may help, however marginally, to clarify the debate on these issues. My experiences with terror in my home country—and also in the country where I now reside—have left me with some powerful impressions regarding what went wrong in the past and how we can work together for a more successful future.

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The Algerian Experience with Terrorism. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria was one of the first heads of state in the world to address a message of support and sympathy to President George W. Bush on the very day of the September 11 attacks. He then joined the international effort to combat terrorism and clamp down on terrorist financial assets abroad.

No wonder.

Algerians know only too well what it means to be the targets of terrorism. For an entire decade, the nation has had to single-handedly deal with its own terrorist scourge. Its previous

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calls for a world response against terror fell on deaf ears, much like the unheeded call for help made by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in the League of Nations warning the world against fascism as early as 1936. Though its population is one-tenth that of the United States, in just ten years, Algeria has been subjected to ruthless terrorist attacks which have led to losses of life and material damage equivalent to twenty-five times those incurred as a result of the attacks launched against the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11.

One would be hard pressed to find another country in the Arab region or in the Islamic world that has had to pay as high a price as Algeria for working toward justice, freedom, and democracy. Contrary to popular belief, the interruption of the 1991 parliamentary elections did not precipitate the violence in Algeria. Violence erupted across the country before the vote due to the incitements of religious-cum-political zealots who alleged that all people intending to vote against them were apostates and could therefore be killed. These fanatics also declared that, if elected, they would suspend democracy, a concept allegedly alien to Islam. Consequently, the interruption of the electoral process, while regrettable in principle, made it possible to preserve the long-term goal of establishing a stable democracy.

A Welcome Evolution of U.S. Policy over Time. In the years following that interruption of the electoral process, the U.S. administration was of two minds as to whether it should accept this decision to suspend the elections or whether a chance should be given to political Islamism in Algeria. At a Congressional hearing in 1994, one view

expressed was that there was a 50 percent chance that the government would fall within three to four years in the wake of an Islamist takeover.¹

This position was consistent with that of the Reagan administration, which had previously supported radical multinational groups of political Islamists in Afghanistan in order to oust the Soviet Union from that country up until the end of the eighties. It turned out that the very same groups, championed by Osama bin Laden, then redeployed their Algerian volunteers in Algeria itself in order to access power through large-scale killings of innocent civilians under the guise of a distorted vision of an Islamic society.

These are the same groups that turned against the United States in the attack of September 11.

The attention now given by President Bush to the threat of world terrorism, which obviously knows no borders, is to be welcomed. It corrects the U.S. position with regards to Algeria, ceasing to consider political Islamism as a possible option for our nation.

I would also like to note that it is fortunate that U.S. officials no longer invoke the expression "crusade against terrorism," a term that would have excluded by definition the involvement of Moslem states in the international effort now under way, as it evokes a past clash of civilizations that lay at the heart of the original medieval Crusades.

Not a Clash of Civilizations or Values. In a very real sense, then, the term "crusade" fosters the impression that Islam and the West are embroiled in a battle of good versus evil, a ludicrously-compressed representation of a disorderly reality that cannot be pigeonholed or strapped down in this way, as our two

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cultures have merged seamlessly for centuries in the ocean of history.²

Too much has been made out of the differences in values between the West and Islam. Neither Islam nor the West is monolithic, and each is enlightened (and backward) in its own way. Islamic societies are in need of improvements, yet so are those of the secular West. For example, in terms of the empowerment of women, many Islamic countries may be ahead of Western states. Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Turkey all currently have or have recently had women as heads of state or government, while the largest Western

of conscience rather than a reduction of the faith to a civil and a penal code by the state. This would represent a move from "catholic" to "protestant" Islam, to use the expression of professor Mohamed Arkoun.⁴

On the other hand, Western secularism is relative. Originally, the separation of church and state in the United States was a political move to assert the American identity through severing links with the Church of England, rather than an outright commitment to secularism. Thomas Jefferson himself believed that one of the basic school books across the

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country has never had a woman president. Women also had the right to vote in Afghanistan and Iran decades before they did in Switzerland, where universal suffrage did not exist until 1971.

Indeed, I also dispute the idea that the principle of secularism is a dividing line with Islam. Consider the United States, a so-called secular nation whose percentage of the Moslem population is similar to that of Christians in a Moslem country like Senegal. Of the last three presidents of Senegal, one has been Christian and another has a Christian wife. Can one imagine the reverse in Washington?

Doubtlessly, Islamic societies still have a major problem in what is called the "management of the sacred,"³ which under Shiism is controlled by the clergy and under Sunnism is de facto controlled by the state. A jump into modernity would require an internalization of the sacred by each individual as a matter

country should be the Bible. Also, Congress begins each day with a prayer.

Finally, many of the presumed differences between Islam and the West are the result of ideological and ethnic stereotypes. President George W. Bush has stated that the U.S. response to September 11 targets neither a country, nor a people, nor an ethnic or religious group. Indeed, it would not be fair to identify networks of radical terrorists with a particular population such as Arabs or Moslems. Terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon that exists to different degrees and in different forms in many countries, including the United States, Ireland, Spain's Basque country, Corsica, India, Peru, and Columbia, as well as in the Moslem world. This fact is often overlooked, however, in favor of the stereotypical Islamic terrorist. One does not equate terrorism with the United States just because Timothy McVeigh blew up the

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federal building in Oklahoma. Nor is it likely that an American of Irish descent will be prevented from boarding a plane because of the sound of his name.

One must remember the wave of anti-Semitism which targeted the Jews and culminated in the state-sponsored atrocities leading up to World War II.

Though not comparable with the former, one must also be mindful of the impact of Roosevelt's Executive Order 9016, which was issued after Pearl Harbor to authorize the internment of 110,000 innocent American citizens or residents of Japanese origin.

The international community must ensure that the tragedy of the WTC, the Pentagon, and the Pennsylvania crash does not unleash a further abomination in the form of a new wave of anti-Semitism and hatred. Only this time, the world must look to protect not the descendants of Isaac, but the descendants of his elder brother Ismail: the Arab people. The repeated broadcast on September 12 by several world television news agencies of footage showing a Palestinian woman and a few kids celebrating, eating sweets, making V signs, and pulling faces at the camera does not bode well for the future. The commentator said the people were rejoicing about the U.S. tragedy, thereby breeding hatred against Arabs worldwide. This overshadowed the impact of an outpouring of sympathy from Arab governments and teeming millions across the entire Arab region, as well as from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, representing Islam throughout the world.

Anti-Semitism is an evil that will not bear containment. If it is tolerated for one Semitic subgroup like the Arabs, it will spread to encompass all Semites without exception and contaminate ethnic relations worldwide. Therefore, President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Attorney General John Ashcroft deserve commendation for clearly drawing the distinction between Moslems and those who blaspheme God/Allah by committing evil in his name. The president rightly underscored the fact that the terrorists are traitors to their own faith.

A Religion of Peace. It is both dangerous and wrong to view Islam as a religion of terror. Prejudice, vilification, and instability are the only possible results. Nothing exists in the Holy Koran that lends support to violent extremism. The Koran indeed refers specifically to extremists who stray from the true teachings of their religion, and indicates that one should not pity them when they are exposed to retribution: "Is he then (of those) to whom the evil of their conduct is made alluring so that they look upon it as good. For Allah leaves to stray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. So let not thy soul go out in sighing after them: for Allah knows well what they do" (35:8).

The prophet Muhammad himself (p.b.u.h.)⁵ warns us against the evils of fanaticism, explaining that "religious extremism has brought disaster on those who came before you" (reported by Ibn Abbas). He also said, "A believer

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remains within the scope of this religion as long as he does not kill another person illegally," that is, outside direct military confrontation.

Islam is not a religion of violence as the media tends to convey, but a religion of moderation. As the Koran says: "Thus we have made of thee a Nation of the middle ground that ye might bear witness of people" (2:143). In this context, bearing witness means exercising tolerance and being even-handed.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) gave the following instructions to his troops before combat: "Do not be excessive, do not kill a child nor a woman nor an old person nor a person who is secluded in his hermitage. Do not burn a fruit tree nor cut trees, nor demolish structures."

So I ask, if this cannot be done in wartime, how could it be tolerated in peacetime?

Islam remains the religion of peace in spite of the biased translation of Jihad as "Holy War," which evokes images of a modern-day Crusade. Its true meaning is "the exertion of effort" or "straining towards an objective."

The Greater Jihad is the one to be waged against our own moral weaknesses and selfishness. The Lesser Jihad, which is the resort to a just war, can only be invoked to overcome schism in faith, to protect believers from oppression, or to react to outside aggression. Jihad cannot be used to exercise military domination of one people over another, to exact revenge, to colonize others, or to force others to change their political allegiance. As soon as legitimate objectives are achieved or when the enemy expresses a desire for peace, Jihad has to stop or it becomes an unjust war.

The root of the word Islam itself is "peace," which is also one of the ninety-

nine names of God. Traditionally, "peace" is used in the greeting used for both Moslems and non-Moslems alike.

The Need for an Even-Handed Response.

As military action against the Taliban government and the terrorist groups it harbors extends to the whole of Afghanistan, one should meditate on these words of the Holy Koran: "And if ye punish, let thy punishment be proportionate to the wrong that has been done to thee...for Allah is with those who restrain themselves and those who do good" (16:126).

The Islamic religion does not recognize collective punishment as it forbids that anyone be held responsible for another person's action. "Do not" says God in the Koran, "impose the burden shouldered by one on the shoulders of the other" (17:15). The fate of the civilian population in Afghanistan during this tragedy is certainly worthy of compassion, and the impending humanitarian crisis should be a major source of concern.

Fighting terrorism is a complex, long-term task involving a multiplicity of instruments in the diplomatic, financial, and intelligence fields, as well as both new and traditional forms of military action.

There is also a need to address the circumstances that have promoted the "propensity for violence" of certain population groups throughout the world. To analyze this increased "propensity for violence" is not to seek to justify or excuse it, but to eradicate its underlying causes. In broad terms, resentment, frustration, and despair breed violence. Violence looks for an ideology to legitimize itself. A lunatic fringe then emerges from this process of social fermentation, instrumentalized by evil minds concerned only with power, not the soul.

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Some current causes of frustration and despair are internal and relate to the labors of countries whose populations live in poverty and who are the targets of exclusion; they also relate to countries whose economies are in transition. These nations have to put their act together, but are also in need of external support.

Among other causes of violence is the perceived double standard applied to the Palestinians and the rest of the world by major powers on such issues as human rights and the right to statehood. The Palestinian Intifada is correctly confined to its territory, but all Moslems in other parts of the world share frustration due to the stalemate and to what they perceive as blatant injustice. The maintenance of sanctions in the Middle East that hurt innocent people and not their leaders exacerbate the problem. Terrorists use this frustration as fuel to propel themselves into positions of power.

Despite these far-reaching frustrations, the overwhelming majority of countries, friend and foe alike, stood by the United States in condemning these atrocities. This valuable social capital, thus acquired by the United States, should be preserved to cement a long-overdue, broad international effort to combat the scourge of terrorism. Islam and the West should not regress to a state of mutual suspicion. After all, we belong to one and the

same civilization: human civilization, a rich blend of diverse cultures and values that have accumulated over time. By building on the unanimous condemnation of violence while learning from its causes, by understanding the difference between terrorism and legitimate resistance to foreign occupation, and by combating forces in adopting and implementing a UN convention against terrorism, the outcome of the war on terror may truly be a victory for everyone.

People in the United States have given a lot more thought to reality in the Arab and Moslem communities than to stereotypes. This will help dispel the misconceptions to which I have referred, thus avoiding their awesome consequences.

I attended a meeting between the president of my country, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and U.S. president George W. Bush on November 5, 2001. I was gratified and inspired by their common vision and shared resolve to combat terrorism through involving the United Nations in a world-wide response to what is, in effect, a global challenge. President Bush's statement in the world body on November 10, 2001 eloquently confirmed the commitment of the United States to making the UN the centerpiece of the civilized world's response to the evil that threatens it. This bodes well for our common future.

NOTES

¹ Committee on Foreign Relations-Hearing before the Sub-Committee on Africa, March 22, 1994 p.37

² Edward Said, "Adrift in Similarity," *Al-Ahram Weekly* (11-17 October 2001), <www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2001/555/index.htm>.

³ Mohamed Arkoun in personal conversations.

⁴ Conference given at the Library of Congress on the theme "The Jihad according to Islam", Washington, D.C. October 12, 2001.

⁵ Peace Be Upon Him