

# MUSLIMS, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND SECURITY

By Haroon Siddiqui  
Editorial Page Editor Emeritus  
The Toronto Star

and author, *Being Muslim* (Groundwood Books, Toronto and Berkeley, 2006)

## Introduction

Every passing day proves that we have made disastrous mistakes in the “war on terrorism.” Many can be attributed to the West’s misconceptions about Islam and the tendency, dating back to the Crusades (1098-1291), to see Muslims primarily through the prism of their religion (“theologo-centrism,” as French Orientalist Maxime Rodinson famously called it), whereas most of the problems afflicting Muslims today are not theological. It is, therefore, essential that in order to address the potential security threat posed by young Muslims in Canada and other Western nations, we examine the West’s – primarily, American -- policies and the charged political discourse of the last five years.

## Under siege

Contrary to the popular belief that the West is under siege from Muslim terrorists, it is the Muslims who have become the biggest victims of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as inconceivable as that would have seemed in the aftermath of the murder of 2,900 people, mostly Americans, on that fateful day. Since then, between 50,000 and 601,000 Iraqis have been killed by the Americans or the insurgents, as estimated by Iraq Body Count, a Non-Governmental Organization that has kept track of Iraqi casualties since the 2003 U.S. invasion, and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, respectively. Nobody knows how many civilians have been killed in Afghanistan. Muslim lives do not matter enough for us to keep a proper count.

In the spots hit by terrorists — from London and Madrid to Amman, Istanbul, Riyadh, Jeddah, Karachi, Islamabad, Bali and Jakarta— more Muslims have been killed and injured than non-Muslims.

Muslims have been the chief victims of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and secret CIA-run prisons around the world, as well as of the U.S. policy of “extraordinary rendition,” subcontracting torture abroad.

The approximately 27 million minority Muslims in Western nations have been living through what the Canadian Arab Federation has called “psychological internment,” alluding to the physical internment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Muslims are victims of racial profiling and frequent identity mix-ups at airports and border crossings, where they may be harassed and

sometimes detained. Monitored by both the secret services and the media, Muslims must be careful about what they say in emails, phone conversations and in public. They must think twice about keeping a beard or wearing overtly Muslim clothing and be mindful of their behavior in public. They must keep proving, in school and at work, that neither they nor their faith fit the caricature of Muslims and Islam drilled into the public consciousness. For American Muslims, the post-9/11 period has proven worse than the McCarthy Era of the 1950s when Senator Joseph McCarthy led a witch-hunt of suspected Communists and ruined the lives of many innocent Americans. Of the reported 83,000 people, almost all Muslim, detained by the American authorities, only 400 have been convicted, including just 40 on terrorism-related charges. Thousands of young Muslim males in the U.S. have been fingerprinted and questioned, and an undermined number deported or harassed into “voluntary deportation.”

Add to this litany of Muslim grievances the following:

- + The U.S.-led United Nations economic sanctions on Iraq (1991-2003) which caused the slow death of up to 1 million Iraqis.
- + The longstanding American support for the brutal and ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.
- + The West's, primarily Washington's, tacit support of Russia's two wars on Chechnya (1994-96 and 1999-todate), which killed about 200,000 Muslims.
- + The American alliance with undemocratic and oppressive Muslim, particularly Arab, regimes.
- + The overt or subtle support for such states as China, Uzbekistan and the Philippines, which have invoked the war on terror as a cover to crack down on Muslim dissidents or Muslim resistance to repressive rule.

Why are we surprised that Muslims everywhere are up in arms?

## Canada

We rightly take pride in our multicultural, cosmopolitan and global outlook, as well as our highly developed sub-culture of human rights. Yet Canada has not been immune from post-9/11 excesses.

There's the tragedy of Maher Arar, now being addressed after a judicial inquiry.

There's the less well-known incidents of three other Arab Canadians also tortured in Syria, who are yet to discover the extent of the Canadian complicity, if any, in their plight.

There's the detention on security certificates of five longtime Canadian residents of Arab origin. Their cases are making their way through the courts but they still do not know what their crime has been, and two had to go on long hunger strikes to protest their living conditions -- in one case, to just get winter clothing and slippers for his cold cell and in the other, to get medical treatment. As Alexandre Trudeau, son of the late prime minister, who made a documentary on the five, told me: “It's one thing to say we need to hold them because they are a threat to national security; it is another to be punitive with them. The logic may well be that such harsh conditions are an encouragement for them to voluntarily agree to deportation” to their native nations of Syria, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, which are known to practice torture.

“Voluntary deportation” was what 22 Pakistani and one Indian Muslim men agreed to after being rounded up in Toronto in 2002 amid sensational accusations of being an al Qaeda sleeper cell that was going to blow up a nuclear facility and the CN Tower. But in the end, they were only charged with petty immigration violations — not terrorism offenses— and they simply left the country, their lives ruined.

Now there’s the case of the 17 Muslim youth in Toronto, charged with alleged terrorist intent, who are waiting for what one hopes will be speedy, open and fair trials.

## Muslim malaise

None of the above is to say that Muslims do not have problems. In fact, Muslims *are* in a state of crisis, but their most daunting challenges are not religious but rather geopolitical, economic and social— problems that have caused widespread Muslim despair and, in some cases, militancy, both of which are expressed in the religious terminology that Muslim masses relate to.

Hundreds of millions of Muslims live in zones of conflict, mostly in areas of European and American meddling, past and present, from the Middle East to Asia. Nearly 400 million Muslims live under authoritarian rule.

The total GDP of the 56 members of the Islamic Conference, representing more than a fifth of the world’s population, is less than 5 per cent of the world’s economy. Their trade represents barely 7 per cent of global trade, even though more than two-thirds of the world’s oil and gas lie under Muslim lands. The most undemocratic Muslim states, which also happen to be the closest allies of the US, are the most economically backward. The Arab nations, with a combined population of 280 million, muster a GDP less than that of Spain. The rate of illiteracy among Arabs is 43 per cent, worse than that of much poorer nations. Half the Arab women are illiterate. A disproportionate percent age of the world’s youth are Muslim, for whom there are few jobs. A majority of the world’s 12 to 15 million refugees are Muslims, fleeing poverty and/or oppression. Europe’s nearly 20 million Muslims suffer high unemployment and poverty amid widespread discrimination, especially in France, Germany and Great Britain.

It was inevitable that many Muslims would find comfort in Islam.

Fundamentalism has been on the rise (along with a parallel rise among Christians, Jews, Hindus and others). Mosques are full. The use of the *hijab*, even the *niqab/burqa* (the all-enveloping garment that even covers a woman’s face) is on the rise. *Madrassahs* (religious schools) are packed. *Zakat*, Islamic charity, is at record levels. With state institutions riddled with corruption and nepotism, some of the most talented Muslims have abandoned the official arena and retreated into the non-governmental domain of Islamic civil society. The empty public square has been filled with firebrands – ill-tutored and ill-informed clergy or populist politicians who rally the masses for calls for *jihad* for sundry causes. The greater the injustices in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli Occupied territories, Chechnya or elsewhere, the greater the public support for those calling for this or that holy war. *Jihad* has also proven to be good business for many a *mullah* (priest), who have become rich or influential or both. Unelected governments, lacking the legitimacy to challenge such militants, fluctuate between ruthlessly persecuting “Islamists,” or trying to out-Islamize them. To divert domestic anger abroad,

many governments also let radicals rant at the U.S. and rave at Israel, or just Jews. Sometimes, even the elected leaders join in, as Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, denying the Holocaust and calling on Israel to be "wiped off the map."

In reality, most Muslim nations are powerless to address the international crises that Muslims want addressed. Feeling abandoned, the masses find comfort in religion – and on the street. Hence the "we-won't-take-it-anymore" protests against real and perceived insults to Islam – Theo van Gogh's anti-Islamic documentary, the Danish cartoons, and the Pope's quotation of a Byzantine emperor that Islam is an evil force. Such reaction engenders even more hostility in the West toward Muslims and Islam. But the frenzied crowds march on. As the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King said, riots are the voice of the voiceless.

## War on terror

Despite the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars and the killing of tens of thousands and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, George W. Bush's "war on terrorism" has been a colossal failure. There is more terrorism in the world today than five years ago, with Iraq, and, lately, Afghanistan, serving as the best recruiting posters for Osama bin Laden and other militants. The "war for the hearts and minds of Muslims" has also been lost, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan but also in the broader Muslim world, including the Muslim minority communities in the West.

Just as the reasons given for the war on Iraq were proven to be false, most of the explanations tying terrorism to this or that aspect of Islam have not stood the test of time.

When 15 of the 19 terrorists of 9/11 turned out to have been Saudi citizens, several experts blamed Wahhabism, the austere interpretation of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. The problem with the formulation was that the Saudi ruling family, the official guardians of Wahhabism, remains a staunch ally of the US and the chief guarantor of the energy needs of the West. Moreover, the Wahhabis have historically been more concerned with fellow Muslims, not non-Muslims.

Blame was also laid at the doorstep of *madrassahs*, especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But the bombers of Bali and other spots were not products of such schools. Nor were they all Wahhabis. Those who carried out the 2004 Madrid bombing and the 2005 London bombings were Europeans. Three of four British attackers were second-generation British citizens, and the ringleader had studied business in university and been a teacher. The 17 arrested Canadians are products of Canadian public schools and universities. One of the British bombers and two of the 17 Canadians charged are converts to Islam, as was a Belgian suicide bomber who went to Iraq to conduct her evil mission. As in Spain and Britain, the alleged terrorists in Canada had no known connection to Al Qaeda. In all three cases, the culprits came from varied ethnic backgrounds, offering few clues to their developing deviancy. Like the friendly murderer from the neighbourhood who leaves everyone baffled, these young men left acquaintances and their middle-class parents shocked. The common denominator among them has been that they are all Muslims. But what are we to make of that any more than that most white-collar criminals may be Jewish or Christian?

Another popular post-9/11 theory was that suicide bombers were inspired by Islam's promise of virgins in Paradise. That may have motivated the religiously inclined but not others, and certainly not women bombers such as the "black widows" of Chechnya, who had no such sexual favors to look forward to in heaven.

So we must return to earthly reasons for Muslim terrorism.

Prof. Robert Pape of the University of Chicago analyzed every suicide bomber attack between 1980 and early 2004 — a total of 462 incidents — and compiled his results in his book, *Dying to Win*. He concluded that Islamic fundamentalism "has very little to do with suicide terrorism, which is a response to occupation. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Chechnya to Kashmir to the West Bank, every major suicide terrorist campaign -- over 95 percent of all the incidents -- has had its central objective to compel the democratic state to withdraw." The suicide bombings usually stop once the occupying forces have withdrawn: "Once Israel withdrew from Lebanon, the suicide strikers did not follow Israel to Tel Aviv."

## War on Muslims

Islamophobia bears all the symptoms of racism.

It holds up the most marginal and fanatical Muslims, totaling at the most a few thousand, as representatives of all 1.3 billion Muslims. It expects every Muslim to explain or apologize for the actions of the few. Any time some Muslims somewhere commit an atrocity, a chorus of voices demands of Muslims everywhere: "What do *you* have to say about this?" They should have to say nothing more than Christians or Jews or Hindus must for the wrongs of their co-religionists. As Ontario Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman rightly said: "We would not condemn the Italian community because of the Mafia. We would not condemn the Irish community because of the IRA." Or Serb Canadians for the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) in the name of religious nationalism. Or, American Protestants for Timothy McVeigh blowing up a federal building in Oklahoma City (1995).

Law-abiding Muslims are no more responsible for 9/11 and other acts of terrorism than Japanese Canadians or Japanese Americans were for Pearl Harbor, or German Americans, German Canadians and German British were for Nazism.

We would do well to recall what Anne Frank, hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam during the Second World War, wrote in her famous diary: "When a Christian does something wrong, it's his fault. When a Jew does, it's the fault of all Jews."

Yet Muslims are repeatedly told to "take responsibility" for their deviants, "root out the extremists," "weed out the radicals," etc. How are they supposed to do that? By becoming vigilantes? Which self-appointed busybodies will use what yardstick to define "a radical" or an "extremist?" It is laudable that many Muslim leaders and groups are, voluntarily, offering to help in figuring out an early detection system to identify militant behaviour, especially among the young. But it is primarily the responsibility of the state to ferret out and prosecute criminals.

Another oft-asked question of Muslims is, Where are the "moderate" Muslims? These are usually defined as those who not only condemn terrorism, which almost all Muslims do, but who also agree with the policies of George W. Bush, Tony Blair and

Stephen Harper, and confirm the prevailing prejudices against other Muslims, which most Muslims don't and won't.

It is a sign of the times that the Muslims most often courted and quoted by the media are those who attack fellow Muslims and, better still, Islam. He or she — ideally someone alienated from Islam due to some personal experience, which is then presented as symptomatic of the Muslim norm — is portrayed as a “reformer,” courageous enough to speak out. Some may be. But many may be positioning and marketing themselves as such. For them, it is a ticket to prominence. British author and broadcaster Tariq Ali has observed that while Americans no longer keep House Negroes, they do cultivate House Arabs and House Muslims. So do Canadians and Europeans, and they are using them to lend a patina of credibility to questionable policies. In Quebec, for example, the sole Muslim member of the National Assembly was given the lead role in a symbolic vote last year against the ostensible introduction of *sharia*, Islamic religious code, in Ontario. (What had been asked for was not *sharia* at all, but religious-based family arbitration for Muslims, available to Christians and Jews since 1991). One can't imagine a government anywhere using a lapsed or dissident Catholic to strip away the rights of practicing Catholics. The state has no business telling Muslims which Islam to practice. The British, Italian and French colonialists tried that and failed. Conservative interpretations of Islam are as legitimate as conservative interpretations of Judaism and Christianity, so long as they do not violate the law of the land.

It is fallacy to think that the only good Muslim is one who is secular, a minimalist believer, or not a believer at all. If anything, the West needs to be wary of those Muslims who may be too ready to parrot what it wants to hear. America lost Iran to the Islamic revolution in 1979 by listening only to pro-American Iranians. The Bush administration got into trouble in Iraq by accepting the tall tales told by exiled Iraqi politicians about weapons of mass destruction and how the invading American troops were going to be welcomed with flowers.

As long as the West keeps looking for anti-Islamic Muslims, it will fail. If it is waiting for Islam to be depoliticized, it will be waiting forever.

We need to rethink our terminology, too. What do we mean, for example, by “political Islam,” “extremist Islam,” “Islamism” or “Islamist extremism”? Do these terms include Muslims who may not follow all the rituals of the religion but still have an Islamic consciousness and certainly a strong sense of solidarity with Muslims everywhere? The world needs better ways to distinguish between the many Muslims who want peaceful change and the few who advocate violence.

Our public discourse is dangerously distorted, and public policy badly skewed, when the only Muslim voices the public is allowed to hear are those of Osama bin Laden and other militants on the one hand and, on the other, those willing to mimic the prejudices of their benefactors. This leaves out a vast majority of Muslims, the very constituency that the West needs to hear from, not only for a better understanding of Islam and Muslims but, more important, to help marginalize the terrorists.

## War on Islam

Not only are all Muslims blamed for terrorism, but Islam itself, along with the Prophet Muhammad. This is neither new nor original. During the Crusades, Islam was depicted as a religion of the sword and Muhammad demonized as Mahound, the Prince of Darkness, or the Beast of the Apocalypse. Now, he is caricatured as a terrorist. Islam is demonized as a fascist ideology, fundamentally aggressive or totalitarian. Muslims, the scimitar-wielding warriors of the past, are presented as “Islamic terrorists” and “violent jihadists,” who, like a keg of dynamite, could explode at any time.

The Qur’an is being studied for clues to the militant Muslim mind. Tony Blair is said to have read it thrice to understand terrorism. There was no such rush to buy the Bible or the Torah when some Afrikaners or Serbs or Jewish settlers were justifying their actions in the name of carrying out their unholy missions.

Even more instructive is the fact that anti-Islamists are quoting the same lines from Qur’an, selectively and out of context, as Osama bin Laden — they to “prove” that Islam is a militant faith and he to justify his murders. What are we to make of *this* axis of evil?

Like any other faith, Islam can be and is used by both fundamentalists and liberals, and by the violent and the peaceful, to rationalize their agendas. To blame terrorism on this or that holy book is to be intellectually lazy and politically dishonest. Besides, Muslims are no more going to rewrite the Qur’an than Jews are the Torah, Christians the Bible or Hindus the Mahabharata.

Hardly a week goes by without some Muslim religious/cultural practice being held up to disproportionate scrutiny and demonization. One day, it’s the *hijab* in France and Germany; another day, it’s the *niqab* in Britain – both pieces of cloth cited as an example either of the Muslim woman’s subservience or her militant subversion of secular values.

“What we have is not a clash of civilizations but a clash of ignorance,” the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims, told me in an interview. “You can be an educated person in the Judeo-Christian world and know nothing — I mean, nothing — about the Islamic world. The presumption in democracies is that the electorate is capable of commenting on major issues of national or international importance, and that our leaders are educated in the subject matters that they need to know about in order to lead. So, unless there is a better understanding of the Islamic world, democracies are not going to be able to express themselves on Islamic issues.”

## War on multiculturalism

Blaming globalization and multiculturalism for the rise of a handful of Muslim terrorists amidst us is as obtuse as laying collective guilt on all Muslims. One British cabinet minister bemoaned recently that “global tensions are being reflected in the streets of local communities.” Why wouldn’t they be? Why is economic/corporate globalization glorious but not the inevitable parallel political or cultural globalization?

Others are pointing fingers at multiculturalism. Are we being too tolerant of different cultures? Do we instill enough “Canadian values?” Should we make newcomers

sign a code of ethics? Quebec once flirted with just such “a social contract” between immigrants and “the host society.” But it had to give up on the hare-brained idea. Canadians already have a social contract. It is the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That is our common holy parchment, bonding the native-born and the foreign-born.

Spain does not have a multicultural policy; in fact, it actively discriminates against its Muslims. Britain is not legislatively multicultural. The United States takes a decidedly different approach than Canada, assimilating rather than integrating newcomers. Yet, none of that made a whit of difference to the terrorists.

Increasingly, security experts are pointing to Iraq and other conflicts for the increasing terrorism. An official British report on the subway bombing concluded that the culprits were “ordinary British citizens with little known history of extremist views.” They were radicalized and motivated by “perceived injustices” committed by the West against Muslims. A report by Royal Institute of International Affairs also linked the bombings to British involvement in Iraq. Similarly, speaking of homegrown second- and third-generation Canadian terrorists, Luc Portelance of Canadian Security Intelligence Service said: “Clearly, they are motivated by some of the things we see around the world.” And a handful are channeling their anger into violence, as had members of the Red Brigades and the Basque separatists. French academic Olivier Roy, an expert on Islam, says ‘born-again Muslims,’ including converts, are following the path of European rebels of an early era: “Thirty years ago, a good many of them would have gone to the extreme left.” Harvard sociologist Marc Sageman, an expert on terrorism, however, notes that American Muslims have not spawned such young terrorists as the European Muslim communities, suggesting that integration, or lack thereof, may be the key factor.

Clearly, there are no easy answers.

Canadians, more than Americans and even Europeans, do recognize this reality, according to several polls, even as our leaders live in denial.

## Conclusion

Bigotry increases in times of trouble, as we have seen in our own age. An anti-French backlash was palpable in English Canada when bilingualism was introduced in 1969 and a year later during the FLQ crisis. I felt it in the Prairies when the paper I worked for, The Brandon Sun, had the foresight and courage to support the Official Languages Act and oppose the War Measures Act. The recession of the early 1990s stoked anger at multiculturalism and helped spawn the anti-immigrant Reform party. The 1990 Oka crisis, the 1999 Mi'kmaq fisheries dispute in Nova Scotia and the Nisga'a land deal in British Columbia led to charges that “race-based rights” for First Nations would undermine common Canadian values. On all those occasions, as also during the recent standoff in Caledonia, Ont., pessimists said racism lurks just below the surface and can bubble up any time. Congenital optimists like myself dismiss such episodes as aberrations, confident that the Canadian social equilibrium will reassert itself.

The post-9/11 period, even while helping Canada become more Canadian, has fanned an anti-Islamism that resembles the old anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. What is said and tolerated about Muslims and Islam would at once be denounced as hate mongering if applied to other people. Replace the words Muslim and Islam in public

pronouncements with Jew and Judaism, or Christian and Christianity, and see how it reads.

Even as we extend our full support to security and law enforcement agencies to ferret out potential terrorists – no group of citizens would be more eager for such an outcome than Muslim Canadians, given the long shadow that terrorism has cast on them – we cannot dilute the fundamentals of our democracy, namely, the rule of law: that suspects are entitled to know the charges against them and to speedy, fair and open trials.

It was clear from the beginning that if the West were to make Islam a dirty word, Muslims would turn a deaf ear to the West. It has and they have. The war on terrorism will fail so long as it is seen as a war on Muslims and Islam, abroad and here at home.

On the international scene, Canada should revert to its traditional role as consensus builder and help wind down the wars and conflicts that are destabilizing the world and feeding Muslim militancy. Canada should be the leading voice in saying that the world must deal with the causes, rather than the symptoms of terrorism.