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Some Thoughts on the WTC Disaster

Asad, T.

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postal address

P.O. Box 11089
2301 EB Leiden
The Netherlands

telephone

+31-(0)71-527 79 05

telefax

+31-(0)71-527 79 06

e-mail

isim@let.leidenuniv.nl

url

www.isim.nl

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The horror of death and destruction of innocents in New York and Washington, the launching of an indefinite 'war against terrorism', the harassment and worse of those seen as Muslims and Arabs in America, the opportunistic attempts to equate the September disaster with Israeli experience of terror (but not with that of the Palestinians) or alternatively to divert attention altogether from Israel's brutal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by denying it has any connection, the absence of a real debate in our democracy. How to think about such matters?

TALAL ASAD

Surely several things are needed to deal with terrorism. First of all: compassion for those who have experienced the horror, the comforting of the relatives and friends of victims, a return as quickly as possible to normality, an alert refusal to allow innocents in America – especially Muslim- and Arab-Americans – to suffer fear, harassment and worse. Second: we need greater security at home and the pursuit of the international criminals who have perpetrated this horror, but a pursuit that remains fundamentally within the framework of international law, and that is carried out with a concern that more innocents don't suffer, and that our liberties aren't curtailed. Surely, the international character of the struggle against 'terrorism' consists not merely in its being an alliance of several countries to prevent further anti-American injury from abroad. More than America is at stake here: We need to prevent 'terror' from being a threat to the very conception of a just and secure world.

It has recently been asserted that American intellectuals must not allow any justification of the criminal acts of September 11 to go unchallenged. Of course nothing, absolutely nothing, can excuse let alone justify the massacres in New York and Washington. But should that be the only concern of public intellectuals? Must we not also reject the terms in which the terrorists and their sympathizers would have us discuss this crisis? Whatever its origins, 'terrorism' is an abomination because it acts ruthlessly in a particular cause, it has contempt for the life of innocents, and it is ready to create and countenance chaos in what is believed to be 'the enemy's territory'. We must refuse to encourage the terrorist mindset. Thus while we need to understand the spontaneous anger and desire for revenge of those who have directly lost a relative or friend, public intellectuals themselves must be careful not to fuel such emotions. In other words: All talk of 'war against evil' tends to encourage excess; measure and proportionality require the language of 'law and justice'.

We have repeatedly been told that the September 11 terrorists have attacked 'our values'. But what values are these? Our concern for the loss of innocent human life, our compassion for those who have suffered,

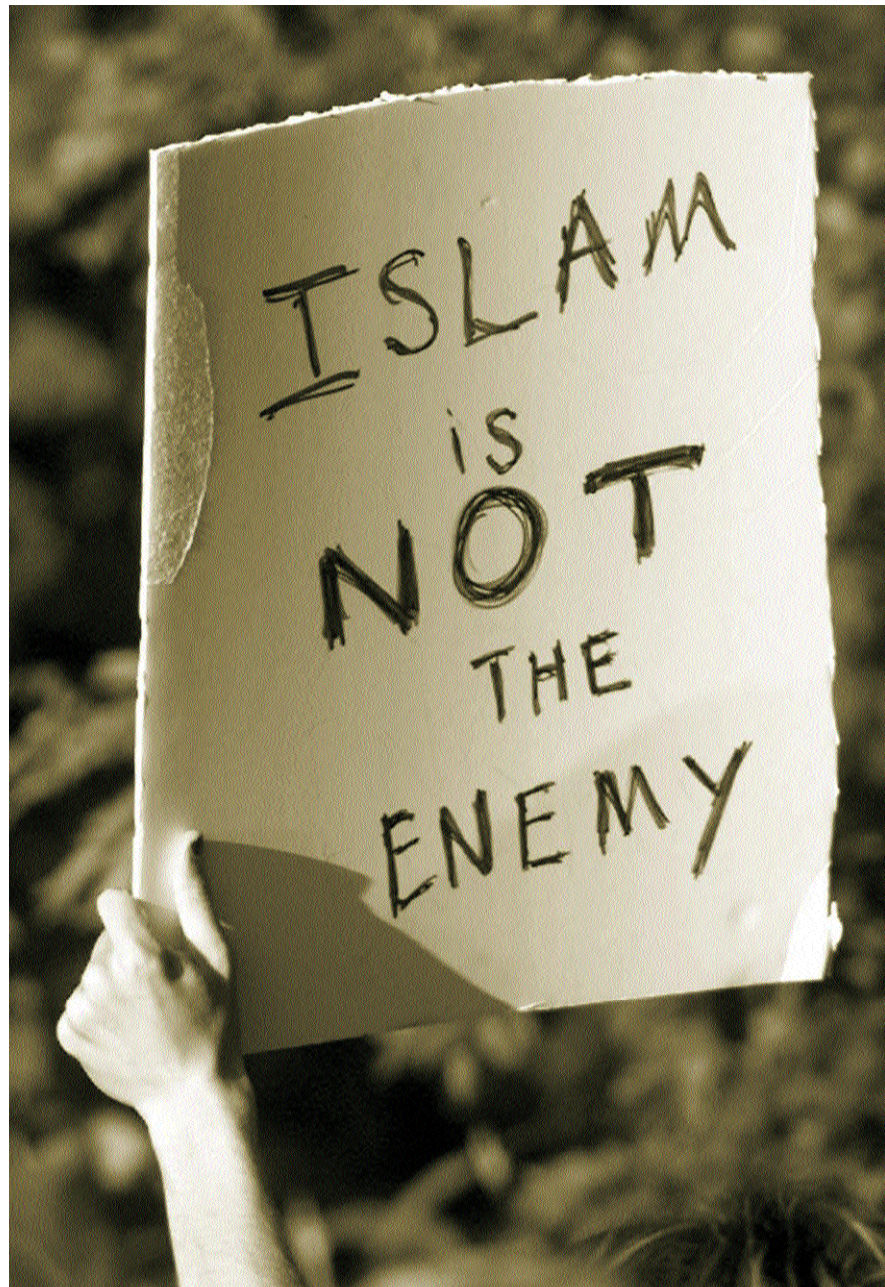


PHOTO: SHANNON STAPLETON; © REUTERS 2001

our anxiety about innocents who may yet suffer further violence. Our values are the flourishing of life and the measure of law. The terrorist mindset is found not only among those (whether gangs or states) who carry out acts of physical violence but also incipiently among those who employ a particular public discourse – the discourse of self-righteousness and revenge, of disregard for proportionality, of insisting on the immorality of self-criticism. And who are 'we' whose values terrorists violate? Contrary to the assertions emerging frequently from our media, these values do not belong

exclusively to 'Western civilization' but to decent, compassionate people who belong to traditions throughout the world: Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh – or, for that matter, atheist. The talk in our media is of a war against the evil of 'Islamic terrorists'. This already seems to me an ideological concession to terrorists, even if we make the ritual qualification by saying that most Muslims are 'moderate Muslims'. (I am reminded of polite anti-Semites talking about 'good Jews'.) The equation of Islam with terrorism is already made in the popular mind and 'experts' have leapt in by the

score to explain or qualify it. We should not be surprised at what is euphemistically called the 'backlash'. The unfortunate consequences of the talk about Islamic terrorism are the promotion of further antagonism against Muslim-Americans and Arab-Americans, as well as further hostility towards Muslims and Arabs worldwide. We are in effect being urged to forget the range of recent non-state terrorisms – in Northern Ireland, Spain, Sri Lanka (even within the US, in Oklahoma and elsewhere) – which have no connection with Muslims. The salience of September 11 is that it was an attack by a group of foreigners against the United States – not against Britain or France or Germany or Japan. That alone makes it an attack 'against humanity', giving it a moral and legal status that none of the other cases of terrorism in our contemporary world has ever been given.

A respected liberal daily carries an informative Special Report that explores wider questions. It is headed 'Why Do They Hate Us?' (*Christian Science Monitor*, 27 September 2001) and accompanied by numerous photographs of Muslims, people from different walks of life, young and old, men and women. The title represents an unfortunate but not atypical elision. Do 'They' (an indeterminate Muslim population) really 'Hate' (not 'criticize' or 'condemn' or 'feel bitterly about') 'Us' (not particular American foreign policies but all Americans)? Intellectuals know the danger of loaded questions that pollsters sometimes employ: 'Why do you hate us?' Speak. Tell us what you feel. We (*all* Americans, government and people alike) are listening. I am sure this was not deliberate on the part of the *Monitor*, which means that it is part of the unconscious media culture.

My own experience is that most people in the Muslim world are not consumed with hatred towards Americans but are deeply critical of the double standards used in foreign policy by US governments. Of course there are many who do express hateful or ignorant views about America and the West. But even among these not many would countenance, let alone do, what the terrorists did on September 11. Not every argued criticism of US policy should be represented as 'hate'. Not every emotional response should be equated with a readiness to commit acts of terrorism. The connection between what people say (or hear) and what they do is often indirect.

►
**Banner held by
a protestor during
a pro-US march
organized by the
Islamic Mission of
America in
New York,
16 September
2001.**

Continued from front page: Some Thoughts on the WTC Disaster / by Talal Asad

An expert's political agenda

Stephen Schwartz, intellectual and journalist, thinks differently. In his widely circulating article entitled 'Ground Zero and the Saudi Connection', first printed in *The Spectator* (22 September 2001), he claims to have discovered the real cause of the crime of September 11: the orthodox tradition of Islam that originated in Arabia called, by outsiders, 'Wahhabism', after the 18th-century Najdi reformer Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab. In my view the article is typical of much irresponsible literature about 'fundamentalism' put out by the many 'experts' who eagerly pursue their own political agendas.

Wahhabis have often been likened to Puritans by Europeans for their severity in matters of religion, their insistence on simplicity in worship and the equality of all believers, and their strict legalism. They are also now called 'fundamentalists' by critics. Schwartz grandly concedes that not all Muslims are extremists, that terrorism isn't intrinsically connected to Islam, but insists that 'all Muslim suicide bombers are Wahhabis'. He goes on with MacCarthyite logic to add: 'except, perhaps, for some disciples of atheist leftists posing as Muslims in the interests of personal power, such as Yasser Arafat.' Because all Wahhabis are actual or potential terrorists, all Muslim terrorists are Wahhabis. They are also 'Islamofascists' and, puzzlingly, 'have much in common with Bolsheviks.' This kind of logic enables Schwartz to put together a long

string of terrorist and militant activists (all Muslims, of course) in different countries and to call them Wahhabis regardless of whether they adhere doctrinally to that tendency or not. He either doesn't know or doesn't care to tell us that Wahhabis belong to the Hanbali school of law that (like all Sunni schools) does not authorize the killing of innocents even in war and certainly not the suicidal criminality committed on September 11. He doesn't know or doesn't care to tell us that theologians very close doctrinally to 'Wahhabis', for example Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi who lives in the Gulf, strongly condemned the September 11 terrorists on religious grounds, that Shaykh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah (a 'Wahhabi'), chief religious authority in Saudi Arabia, condemned suicide bombers on Islamic grounds a year before September 11. Instead, Schwartz gleefully reminds us that the ruling family of Saudi Arabia is officially 'Wahhabi'. What worries him is not that they are corrupt and repressive rulers, or that their internal security is guaranteed by the United States on a quid pro quo basis (all of which causes great resentment among ordinary Saudis). His concern is that 'Wahhabi Saudi Arabia' supports actual and potential terrorism throughout the world because it gives money to various Islamic institutions. Hence the danger Saudi Arabia represents – especially in the United States where its religious influence among immigrants is rampant. For here, so he assures us, 80% of the mosques are 'Wahhabi', and they preach extremism. The children of

Muslim immigrants who are exposed to 'Wahhabi' influence 'opt for Islamic revolution and commit themselves to their self-destruction, combined with mass murder.' Immigrants committed to mass murder? How many school-shootings in the United States have been carried out by Muslim children?

I attended over 20 mosques in New York during last year, but I cannot claim that this constitutes a representative sample. However, in none of them did I hear preachers urging 'extremism' – although they did vary considerably in liveliness and intelligence. I can't help but conclude that Schwartz's article represents a recognizable kind of public discourse about what is supposed to be going on in the Middle East, a discourse promoted by a range of better-known names. It has mischievous implications for American attitudes to Muslim and Arab immigrants – and for our foreign policy in the Muslim world.

Internally America is, for all its flaws, a democratic society committed to the rule of law and freedom of speech. But externally American military and economic might has not always aimed at democratic outcomes nor always followed international law – especially in the Middle East, where it has too often supported despotic governments and brutal occupiers, and engaged in military interventions and conspiratorial politics. I make this point not in order to 'justify' the atrocity of September 11, to 'blame' America and argue that the murder of several thousand people was 'deserved'. I can only

repeat unreservedly that no one deserves to be murdered. My suggestion – in common with that of many other commentators – is that we try to understand the conditions that have made this kind of attack probable. And I point to America's policies in the Middle East as being among those conditions. When we seek to understand the conditions that generate violent gangs among the youth of Los Angeles, no sensible person would think we were justifying murder.

It seems to me in any case that because we now live in a highly interdependent world where the exercise of power must carry commensurate responsibility, the responsibilities of the world's only superpower must be not only towards the safety and prosperity of American citizens but towards a just and secure world.

Talal Asad is professor of anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, USA.
E-mail: TAsad@gc.cuny.edu