

Ahmed Rehab's Review of the First Chapter of *Jihad and Crusade: Religion and Violence after the Cold War*

In this forthcoming book, *Jihad and Crusade: Religion and Violence after the Cold War*, Dr. Michael Sells tackles a festering subject that spurs the curiosity of many Americans today: "what is the nature of the relationship between religion and violence?"

An early observation that has me a little unnerved concerns the first half of the working title: *Jihad and Crusade*.

Though catchy and functional (in that it readily signals Dr. Sells' equitable intent to explore both Christianity and Islam in his treatment of the subject matter), the naked juxtaposition of those two concepts implies that *Jihad* is the Muslim equivalent of *Crusade* and visa versa.

However, *Jihad* and *Crusade* are not equal opposites. Strictly speaking, one is a spiritual exercise and the other is a series of historical events:

The *Crusades* denote a particular series of military expeditions carried out by medieval Christian armies into the Muslim world with the stated goal of claiming the Holy Land. On the other hand, *Jihad* denotes something entirely different: a living doctrinal concept that is central to Islamic credo and that is more accurately defined as "struggling toward justice."

Certainly, under meticulous criteria, this struggle can be an armed one (e.g. resistance to an illegal occupation). Nevertheless, more often than not, *Jihad* connotes a personal struggle against one's own demons (laziness, temptation, biases, gluttony, alcohol dependence, substance abuse, etc).

It is true that over time, the word *Crusade* has acquired new positive connotations (at least in the West) where it no longer exclusively refers to Medieval Europe's bloody escapades in the Middle East. In fact, within today's lexicon, the word is often used to denote a "struggle toward justice" (e.g: a crusade against poverty).

It is also true that over time, *Jihad* as preached and/or practiced by certain Muslims -- both historically and in contemporary times -- amounts to little more than bloody escapades that have little to do with the pursuit of justice.

However, the origins of each concept must neither be overlooked nor neutralized by acquired connotations.

Dr. Sells addresses his book to "a general audience," so it worries me that the use of *Jihad* as per the current title inadvertently reinforces a narrow definition of this very important Islamic concept, further engraining the public misconception that *Jihad* merely means Holy War. The consistent usage of this minimalist definition of *Jihad* makes for one of those "generalizations that frame and limit [the debate on religion and violence] within the public forum today," a prospect Dr. Sells explicitly wishes to avoid.

Of course, it is not Dr. Sells' own opinion that Jihad primarily connotes "Holy War"; rather, it is the de facto interpretation of those Muslims who wage violent campaigns in the name of Islam, often referring to their war as *Jihad* – as it is that of anti-Muslim demagogues.

Dr. Sells is justified in not getting into the debate over the "correct reading of any particular tradition." Nevertheless, it is incumbent that key words and concepts are operationally defined if they are to be frequently referenced, so that they not assume de facto meanings from pop usage.

The question then becomes, whose definitions of Islamic concepts (jihad, etc) do we assume in scholarly discourse - those given to us by the primary sources and texts, or those given to us by individual polemicists?

In his discussion of *Al-Fatiha*, the first chapter of the Qur'an, Dr. Sells is painfully aware that the two often diverge.

Muslim polemicists like Ali al-Timimi claim that *Al-Fatiha* behooves Muslims to "refute" Jews and Christians, says Dr. Sells. Yet there is no mention of "Jews" or "Christians" by name anywhere in the actual Arabic text of *Al-Fatiha*, he rightly points out.

The title of Dr. Sells' first chapter, "Worship as War, War as Worship in the Speech of an Islamic Militant" avoids the pitfalls of the book's working title. By clearly stating the context within which worship and war are intertwined (i.e: the speech of an Islamic militant), Dr. Sells aptly averts the generalizations that frame and limit the discourse on Islam elsewhere in America.

Dr. Sells does four things particularly well in this chapter:

Firstly, he provides sufficient background information on key concepts (e.g: the Qur'an, the Hadith, *Salafism*) rather than merely glossing over them. This is especially helpful to the intended general audience whose knowledge of Islamic concepts is likely to be cursory.

Secondly, he provides interesting comparative anecdotes that even more seasoned readers will find novel and intriguing. An example is the thematic and functional comparison of *Al-Fatiha* and the Christian *Lord's Prayer*.

Thirdly, he demonstrates keen sensitivity to the nuances within Islam, even within a context as particular as *Salafism*: a creed within a tradition (Sunni) within Islam.

Dr. Sells takes the time to explain why *Salafism* should not be viewed as a homogenous entity, pointing out that there are various existing interpretations and manifestations of *Salafism*. This nuance is in fact true even if were to drill down further to *Wahhabism*, which is a version of *Salafism*. Of course, the popular misconception is that all *Wahhabis* are intolerant extremists.

I dwell on that point because the American public is traditionally inundated with impassioned commentaries that fail to recognize the nuances within Islam itself, let alone within a version of a creed of a tradition of Islam.

It is my belief that we cannot expect to make any meaningful advances in fighting terrorism or fighting Islamophobia if we are to remain oblivious to these important nuances.

Additionally, Dr. Sells is careful to steer away from yet another snag that typically undermines our public discourse on Islam: one-way vision. For example, in discussing conflict-based identity, he does not single out Islam; instead, he points out that contentious positions have come up “in the writings of classical Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers from Judah Halevi to Thomas Aquinas to Ibn Tamiyya.”

Fourthly, in questioning polemical interpretations of the Qur’an, Dr. Sells propounds scrupulous argumentation that is coupled with a formidable acuity of not just the letter, but the spirit and methodology of Islam.

For example, Dr. Sells states, “it is one thing to accept the validity of a particular [H]adith. It is quite another to interpolate it into the Qur’anic text.”

This is a key point in the argument against the claim furthered by Khan and Hilali (and adopted by Al-Timimi) that Al-Fatiha “refutes” Christians and Jews, which

they base on how a Hadith related by Adi Bin Hatem interprets “those who have gone astray” and “those who have attained Your wrath” respectively (verse 1:7).

Unfortunately, “Hadith interpolation into the Qur’an” is a common malpractice in some traditional Muslim scholarly circles that, in my opinion, best explains much of the deviant attitudes and outlooks that have encroached upon Islam since the passing of Muhammad.

Dr. Sells raises two other key concerns regarding the invocation of Bin Hatem’s Hadith: authenticity and context. Bin Hatem’s Hadith itself is a weak report, as classified by the Islamic Science of Hadith, so its authenticity is in doubt, further precluding it from overruling actual verses of the Qur’an. Likewise, Bin Hatem does not provide the context of the Hadith, raising questions about the permissibility of its use in general terms.

Then there is the most compelling argument of all, if the verses really intended to “refute” Jews and Christians, then “why did the divine author, the consummate master of expression and precision, fail to specify the intended meaning within the Fatiha itself?”

Dr. Sells does not merely laundry list problematic interpretations of the Qur’an that eternalize the refutation of monotonous and homogenous Jewish and Christian entities. He simultaneously raises pertinent theological and logical questions from within the Islamic context that challenge such understanding serving a reminder that Khan and Hilali do not hold a scholarly patent on Qur’anic interpretation.

But why linger on apocalyptic interpretations of the Qur’an, as opposed to say the constructionist interpretation of *Fethullah Gulen*, a respected contemporary scholar who has leveraged the Qur’an to inspire millions of Muslims to embrace dialogue and coexistence with Jews and Christians?

Because understanding how the Qur'an can be packaged to write off entire groups of human beings is crucial if we are to ascertain the root problem of religious extremism and terrorism within the Muslim world.

Extremism and terrorism are themselves easily explained; however, extremism and terrorism that is condoned – even sanctioned or inspired - by religion need rigorous scholarly exploration.

It is important to state that Khan and Hilali have never themselves urged terrorist attacks against Jews and Christians. Yet, the demonization of Jews and Christians prevalent in their translation and interpretation of the Qur'an provides a pretext that can readily be exploited by fiery orators such as al-Tamimi. Without a sense of divine legitimacy, no orator, no matter how mesmerizing, can successfully exhort followers to inter-religious confrontation and war.

The most important idea discussed in this chapter is that of the fixity and fluidity of militant religious identities, the latter of which makes it difficult to find appropriate nomenclature for militant interpretations. We cannot use the name of a person or a group as they may move beyond a specific interpretation, though the interpretation remains behind, picked up by others.

In my mind, all “extremist” interpretations are 1) “absolutist” and 2) “puritan.” Absolutist in that “it’s my way or the highway” and puritan in that “I am only interested in how it was done 1400 years ago, when things were pure and unadulterated, any knowledge that anyone else, including my contemporaries, can offer me is contaminated.”

But even if I were correct, that does not help in naming the brand of Islam that breeds destructive absolutism and Puritanism.

One area that I find to be somewhat underdeveloped in this chapter is an analysis of the causation behind militant identities. What causes Bin Baz, Khan, Hilali, and Al-Tamimi to opt for a militant interpretation?

Dr. Sells touches upon the question (but not really the answer) when he talks about a defining moment in the life of young Al-Tamimi. A militant rabbi offends then-tolerant Al-Tamimi with an anti-Muslim diatribe. Dr. Sells points out that such an episode could have just as well spurred a young boy to a life of challenging bigotry, rather than one that is radically confrontational. But it didn't. Why not?

Dr. Sells provides a general answer, which though wise, seems rushed:

“At some point human choice, environmental factors, and global interpretive contexts intersected, as always subject to the mystery of human choice and contextual determination, in a fateful encounter, no single factor of which may be the dominant cause, but each of which is significant.”

I could not agree more; however, I think at least one of those factors merits a deeper look by Dr. Sells within the context of a chapter that understudies War and Worship in the speech of an Islamic militant such as this.

Al-Tamimi's profile does not seem to be that of the emotionally vulnerable and naive young man prone to a run-of-the-mill brainwashing.

His parents were both successful professionals and he seems to have had a privileged upbringing that fortified him with plenty of confidence, character, and judiciousness. He was by no means gullible, he was not secluded from the outside world; he grew up in the West, a world of fast and free exchange of ideas. He was highly educated, obtaining a Ph.D. and excelling in his scientific research.

There was plenty of human choice involved in Al-Tamimi's trajectory, but there also had to be external forces that tugged at his moral compass to overcome him so. What possible external factors are powerful enough to impact a headstrong product of Western dynamism and cynicism like Al-Tamimi? Certainly not the mere piety and proselytization of an authoritative sheikh from the East, albeit Bin Baz.

For me, what fills the missing link is none other than the environmental factor, namely the political environment, which I think plays a crucial role in the crystallization – if not creation -- of all modern militant identities.

To what extent are the “Christians” and “Jews” that dominate the discourse of the Bin Baz Salafis buzz words for “Americans” and “Israelis” -- or more generally, for all White Christian and Jewish colonialists including the British, the French, and the Italian.

Much of the militant ideologies emanate from within post-colonialist parts of the world – whether nations in the Middle East, or slums in London -- that are deeply incensed by perceived American and Israeli transgressions as well as British and French transgressions, etc.

Whether consciously or sub-consciously, these modern grievances seem to inform a revisionist interpretation of the 1400 year old Qur'an whereby Jews and Christians are introduced into the Holy Book as the eternal antagonists.

Whereas few disagree on the fact that Jews and Christians are demonized in the militant Islamic paradigm, the “why” question is seldom asked. The simplistic explanation that is quickly given is that it is something intrinsic to the intolerant and hateful nature of the “militant” or the “radical” or the “extremist” or even the “Muslim” (depending on who is doing the analysis).

I do not seek to justify this demonization, nor do I seek to deny that hatred and intolerance may indeed drive that paradigm, but I do think that both the demonization as well as the ensuing hatred and intolerance are (at least in part) a consequence of a post-colonialist interpretation of the world and the humiliating role of Muslim societies (not Muslims) within it.

As such, I wonder if militant identities in Islam have as much to do with failed governments and dwindling economies as they do with problematic interpretations of the Qur'an.

But it is not simply a question of political instability, poverty, and unemployment. Neither Al-Tamimi who was brought up in America or Bin Baz from Saudi Arabia personally suffered from these social ailments.

It is, in the end, a question of the status quo, of power.

Where do Muslim societies stand vis-a-vis the West and Israel? Why do they lag so far behind? Why are Muslim lands still occupied, Muslim civilians still being killed, Muslim resources being sapped? If Muslims do not lag behind in terms of human resources and natural resources, then why do they lack self-determination and are left to be exploited by those powers who wish them no good?

These concerns, and not just those of political instability, poverty, and unemployment, loom heavy in the minds of Muslim militant ideologists, as they do, many non-militant Muslim thinkers.

The difference lies in how those questions are answered. For the militant ideologists, the answer is provided within the context of victimhood: the notion that "we have done nothing wrong to ourselves or to others; our foes have done

everything wrong to us. There is nothing that we can do to change our predicament but to take on the enemy who embodies evil and Godlessness in order that justice, peace, and prosperity can prevail.”

It is within this context and that context alone that apocalyptic world views, eternal homogenous entities, and conflict-identities find fertile ground to thrive and do their deed. Or is it?

I think it is worth some reflection from Dr. Sells. I personally would be curious to read his thoughts. I very much enjoyed the chapter which I found to be thought-provoking. I look forward to the book.

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