ANTI-JEWISH ANTI-MUSLIM RACISMS & THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE/ISRAEL

Varieties of 'Islamophobia' and its targets

Sami Zubaida

Introduction

'Islamophobia' – fear, hostility or negative sentiments with regard to Islam and Muslims – comes in different forms and contexts. In this article, I identify two distinct paradigms: the racist and the secular-liberal, and implicit combinations of the two. The targets of 'Islamophobia' – Muslims – offer a range of public discourses and sentiments which interact with these paradigms. I shall attempt to sketch an 'ideal type' of what I call 'Umma nationalism', a discourse which enters into various sentiments and utterances of diverse actors in various situations, and which relates to pertinent contests. I will start with the historical background, which plays a part in shaping some Muslim attitudes and discourses about Islam and the 'West'.

Muslims and Europe

The historical presence of Muslims in Europe was, for the most part, as rulers: first in Iberia and Sicily and later during the Ottoman rule of the Balkans and much of south-eastern Europe. The states in question were conceived in terms of religious confrontation: Islam versus Christianity. There were, in fact, many Christian and Jewish subjects of the Muslim states, who were formally protected as subordinate subjects on payment of additional taxes. In reality, their conditions and treatment varied over time and place, among different groups and classes, with instances of persecution as well as periods of calm. However, they were mostly better off than Jews and Muslims living in Christian Europe. This history plays an important part in Muslim pride in past glories. In particular, a romanticised picture of al-Andalus, Muslim Spain, is held up as the apex of Muslim civilisation in Europe, far superior to its Christian neighbours.

At a later juncture, European colonial empires ruled over Muslim populations in Asia and Africa, notably India and the Maghreb, then the Mandates following World War One, in Iraq and the Arab Levant. Anti-colonial struggles were variously viewed in combinations of national and religious terms, as Arabs and Muslims versus imperial powers (which were conceived by some as Christian). The presence of many Christians and Jews in anti-colonial movements in some countries complicated the picture. The inception of Israel was the culmination of what is perceived as colonial rule, this time Jewish, which coincided later in the 20th century with the rise of political Islam. The presence

of growing Muslim populations in Europe at the same time was largely a legacy of this period of colonial history.

The nationalist and anti-colonial movements in the Middle East and North Africa in the middle decades of the 20th century were, for the most part, articulated to leftist and Third Worldist ideologies, such as that of Nasirism and the Ba'th, and of Arab socialism. Religion played, for the most part, a subordinate role in the definition of identities and conflicts, though it may have been a more potent factor at a popular level. Islamic identity may have been more central to the politics of Pakistan, given the raison d'etre of its separation from India and continuing hostile attitudes to their more powerful neighbour. The collapse of Nasirism after the 1967 war with Israel and the evolution of the Ba'th in power into family dynasties in Iraq and Syria, as well as the weakening of the left, opened the field to ethnic and religious politics in the region.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 gave a powerful impetus to this sacralisation of politics. The Iran-Iraq war that followed added a sectarian dimension. With political Islam as a major ideological component in power and in opposition, religious definitions of identities of self and adversary became prevalent. The antagonists were not just capitalists/imperialists, but also Christians, Jews and Hindus. Geopolitics was conceived in terms of antagonistic religious communities, or of an atheist West against the true faith. In this perspective, the confrontation was also seen as cultural and civilisational, in continuity with a long history of conflict and rivalry. The occurrence of 9/11 and the following 'war on terror' amplified these sentiments and affiliations.

These definitions and sentiments were by no means universal to Muslims. There is, of course, a diversity of perceptions and affiliations among Muslims, including conservative piety, as well as degrees of secularity and liberal/cosmopolitan orientations, alongside a large measure of indifference. It may be useful to outline an 'ideal type' of what may be called 'Umma nationalism', to which various Muslims may subscribe to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their situation and the issue in question.

Umma nationalism

Umma identification resembles nationalism in that it draws on historical constructions of past glories and ascendancy, current grievances in relation to a historical adversary and programmes for revival and renewed ascendancy. On the civilisational front, there is an assertion of cultural and moral superiority over Western civilisation, especially in its secular and libertarian forms. The Umma is conceived as a unity, confronting assaults from antagonists – the West, Israel and India. There is also an increasingly prominent sectarian dimension to this imagination of the Umma, which I shall not pursue here.

I repeat that I am not suggesting this notion in its consistent entirety to be generally held by the plurality of Muslims, but as a floating discourse, which feeds into various beliefs and declarations by different

actors under various circumstances. It is held in its most consistent and vociferous forms by militant groups, Jihadis and Salafis, drawn upon in intellectual and cultural productions of history and current affairs. Common statements, such as the US is 'killing Muslims' – whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or Africa – is the product of the supposition of Umma unity in victimhood in opposition to the West. It ignores or sidelines the geopolitical, economic and strategic contexts in favour of the religious identity of victims. It ignores the close symbiosis of the US with many Muslims, states and groups. Crucially, it ignores the fact that most Muslim victims are killed by other Muslims.

To re-iterate: 9/11 and the 'war on terror' added greatly to the power and consistency of this narrative, to both Muslims and their antagonists. It is further amplified by the expansion and power of non-state Jihadi actors, from al-Qaida to ISIS, and their wide appeal in sentiment and affiliation to large numbers of Muslims all over the world, but, crucially, to those living in the West.

Most Muslims in the West and elsewhere may not subscribe to this nationalism in discourse or action, but adopt elements of it occasionally. Some in the West may reject it explicitly in favour of a view of common citizenship for Muslims in their countries of residence. There is, however, a trend for non-religious but communal Muslims to view politics and society in terms of the Muslim community and its struggle for recognition and rights, with some degree of subscription to the victimhood elements of the Umma paradigm. This group may be called 'Muslimist', as opposed to 'Islamist'. This characterisation would apply to some middle class professionals, such as lawyers, journalists or academics, who are secular or cultural Muslims in their own lives, but identify with Muslim communities and are often active on issues affecting Muslim rights.

Islamophobia

There are two contrasting paradigms within what is called Islamophobia in the West. The first is straightforward racism, which we see in rightist expressions depicting Muslims as dangerous immigrants. This is in keeping with the racism of previous decades, which was directed against Asian, African and Eastern European communities, which shifted from 'Pakis' to Muslims after the 1980s and the increasing assertion of Muslim rather than ethnic identities. Muslim identification presented an enhanced target for racist attacks, enriched by demands and assertions in some Muslim quarters, regarding, for instance, the superiority and necessity of Shari'a law, the support for Jihadist violence and war, and religious claims for education and cultural production. While the political right directed its attacks against all 'immigrants' and immigration, it singled out Muslims as dangerous infiltrators threatening to swamp 'our' society and culture and introduce Shari'a law.

Liberal secularists, meanwhile, are far from being racist and are, in fact, historically anti-racist activists. They are generally not against the Muslim presence, but fear and oppose Muslim claims on public spaces and institutions and on cultural production, notably censorship through violence. This started with actions surrounding the publication of The Satanic Verses after 1989 and culminated with the Charlie Hebdo events, with many other episodes in between. It is important to note that these fears

have a historical dimension, not against Islam, but against authoritarian and violent religious controls in Europe and elsewhere. The liberties of the modern West, as liberal secularists see it, were achieved as a result of historical struggles and revolutions, in which the churches and religious authorities were prominent protagonists. Freedom of expression, women's rights, sexual liberty, secular education, were all recent achievements in the history of modernity. Homosexuality, for instance, was a criminal offence in Britain until 1967, as was abortion, while divorce was a difficult and expensive procedure. Censorship, especially of sexual material, was mandatory in print, theatre and cinema. The offence of 'blasphemy' remains on the statute book in the UK, although it is inactive.

The demands and incursions made from certain Muslim quarters, with a large degree of communal support, are seen as a threat to liberties so recently gained, which were the outcome of conflicts and struggles. Some religious authorities, such as the Catholic church, continue to fight rearguard campaigns on some of these issues, notably abortion. Meanwhile, evangelical churches in the USA are vociferous in their denunciations. The historical achievements of social and sexual liberalism in much of the West remain in place for the time being. But many fear conservative backlash campaigns and Muslim advocates in these debates are perceived as a particular danger, especially when backed by the threat of violence.

These two paradigms may be consistently held by their key protagonists, racists versus liberals. Different combinations of them, however, not always coherent, appear in public space, the media and popular sentiment.

The global picture

The rise of the Islamic State and 'caliphate', and the spate of other Jihadist violence in Africa, Libya and Yemen, has sharpened and polarised sentiments and public discourses on all sides. The ISIS narrative is a clear and extreme statement of the Umma paradigm and it has found a favourable response among many Muslims, especially the young. Thousands of volunteers have joined from many parts of the world, including the well publicised young men and women from the West. The motives are complex, conditioned by feelings of alienation and hostility, of past glories and current victimhood, as well as a desire for excitement. The seeming success of ISIS in establishing an ascendant Muslim force against the West and other enemies has a great appeal in the Umma narrative. Do these active volunteers indicate more widespread, if passive, sentiments among other Muslims?

There are many speculations about the sentiments and motives for the support for ISIS by Western Muslim youth. I favour the 'anomie' scenario, the contradictions between aspirations and reality. We should first note that it is not an issue of 'integration' into British/European society and culture, as trumpeted by politicians. By all accounts, those radical young men and women are culturally integrated, with reasonable scholastic achievement, involved in the typical youth cultures of football, fashion and even music. Yet, what is held up as the liberties, goals and rewards of liberal, capitalist society are out of reach for many, without the props of family, wealth and social capital.

This dilemma is not peculiar to Muslim youth and includes many others. However, the problem is heightened for Muslims by many factors. First, the incongruence between their family and community background and 'mainstream' society, and the confused identities and orientations that result. Second, and more important, is the hostility and suspicion emanating from various social, political and security quarters, which reinforce their sense of separate identity as Muslims and alienation from mainstream society. Islamist politics and identification presents a realm of moral certainty and ascendancy, as against the ambiguity of 'normal' life. It also promises, for jihadist volunteers, excitement, heroism and sex, away from the humdrum life of work, education and family.

On the other side anti-Muslim sentiments, pronouncements and actions have multiplied in the West as a result of events and high profile attacks, such as those in Paris and Brussels. These provided a boost for anti-Islam, rightist and racist groups, but also led to a general sense of revulsion and fear among many. Sensible voices on both sides try to provide a different perspective and exonerate Islam and Muslims in general from association with the violence. No doubt, they have had some success, but how much?

The ongoing conflict of Israel/Palestine is of particular pertinence to the issues raised here. In interpretations which assign identity to religious community and consider political allegiance accordingly, Israel is identified with Judaism. This identification, implicit or explicit, is pushed by both sides – Zionist and Islamic nationalist. Media and public discourses in the Islamic world have readily adopted the old European antisemitic tropes, notably *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Equally, essentialist and racist characterisations of Arabs and Muslims feature in some Zionist pronouncements, leading to mutual demonisation and denigration. Inevitably, these ideas and sentiments are present among Muslim populations in the West and feed into anti-Jewish manifestations, which are violent at the extremes. This, in turn, feeds into the anti-Muslim platforms of both the Zionists and the European extreme right. It is interesting to note that some old antisemites and their ideological descendants, especially in Eastern Europe, are now supporting Israel because it is bashing Muslims.

We should note, however, that current Muslim anti-Jewish manifestations are distinct from the old European antisemitism, the tropes of which they adopt. To the Europeans, Jews were neighbours and associates, persecuted for their alleged insidious maleficence. In the Muslim world, the Jews are not a presence, but an idea, part of a world politics shaped in accordance with universal religious communities – and Israel is the Jewish side. Of course, sane and wise voices on both sides attempt to dispel these myths, but how successfully?

Biographical note

Sami Zubaida is Emeritus Professor of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck, University of London and a Fellow of Birkbeck College. He is also Research Associate of the London Middle East Institute and Professorial Research Associate of the Food Studies Centre, both at SOAS. He has held visiting positions in Cairo, Istanbul, Beirut, Aix-en-Provence, Paris, Berkeley CA and NYU, and has written and lectured widely on religion, culture, law and politics in the Middle East, with particular attention to Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. His publications include: *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (3rd edition: 2009); *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East* (edited, with R Tapper, 2nd edition: 2000); *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (2003) and *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East* (2011).