Orientalism and (Islamic) Terrorism: Pre and Post Era of the 9/11 Attack on the U.S.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the pervasive view of Orientalists on Islam and Muslims associated with terrorism in the pre and post era of the 9/11 attack on World Trade Centre and Pentagon in United States of America, with a special focus on the factors that contributed to their orientation. The first part of the paper deals with the concept of terrorism in the light of Islamic teachings to debunk the dominant view of Orientalists on Muslims and Islam. Having devoted some space, in the first section, for describing the concept of Orientalism and its traits in the understanding of scholars, the next section of the paper, then, examines the dominant discourses of Orientalists in the US on Islam and Muslims. The paper argues how biased, stereotypical and selective the Orientalists are in their reporting on religious extremism or terrorism, in particular with Islam and Muslims as terrorists. It further argues that terrorism is neither a monopoly of Islam nor of any other religion, given Islam as a religion has always been against the killings of innocent human beings including children, women or elderly people even during the war waged against others. In conclusion, this paper suggests that harboring prejudice, stereotype, hatred, demonization and racism against Muslims associating them with terrorism will not serve the purpose of unity and social cohesion among different ethnic communities across the globe.

Key words: Orientalism, terrorism, Islam and Muslim, stereotype, hatred

Introduction

Muslims are faced with a lot of adversities in the contemporary world with a pervasive influence of Orientalists' approach that had infused Islam and Muslims with terrorism. Arabs and Muslims were at the top of agenda of Orientalist discourses even before the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the United States of America, however, its dominant view had been accentuated especially after the 9/11 attack, with Muslims being caricatured and stereotyped as terrorists and extremists in the world. Hence, Muslims and ultimately Islam have constantly been painted as a religion of violent, gun-loving, Jewish hating and mainly Anti-West ideas in the Western discourse. This, in fact, lacks objective analysis of the phenomenon. The dominance of this approach conditions and compounds the lack of a more comprehensive and objective analysis of the phenomenon informed by concepts and methodology from the social sciences (Rahman, 2009: 109).

It should be noted here, for centuries, various acts of terrorism have been carried out in different parts of the world by terrorist organizations that represent different religions for a variety of purposes. For example, the Irish Republican Army in United Kingdom (IRA, Christian) , Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam in Sri Lanka (LTTE, Hindu), the Maoist in Nepal(Buddhist), and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan(Muslim). It has inflicted an enormous loss on human lives and properties. These terrorist organizations resorted to violence to make their voices heard by killing innocent and defenseless people. Sadly, the fact that these perpetrators of various terrorist acts carry Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jewish identities do not necessarily equate their religious principles which discount all sorts of terrorist acts. The truth is that even if terrorists have Muslim identities, the terror they perpetrate cannot be labelled "Islamic terror", just as it could not be called "Jewish terror" if the perpetrators were Jews or "Christian terror" if they were Christians (Yahya,2002:9). That is because murdering innocent people in the name of a religion is unacceptable in any religion. The media tends to be selective in its reporting on religious fundamentalism. For example, there is little reporting on Jewish, Christian and secular fundamentalism and extremism that would serve to provide a more balanced view of the problem, that is, to show that the problem is not restricted to Muslims(Alatas, 2005:49). However, in reality, labeling of 'terrorism' is employed only to Islamic militant groups to stereotype or prejudice Islam by Orientalists in their discourses. It should be highlighted here that these militant groups have no religious affiliation with Islam since they have different motivations and ideologies for their struggle. In this context, it is believed that this attempt of stereotyping or caricaturing Muslims and eventually Islam associated with terrorism is an obvious manifestation of Western Orientalists.

Suffice it to say the people's uprising of the Arab world against their despotic rulers in the Middle East was negatively associated with 'Islamic terrorism' by the Orientalists. Amidst the massive revolution

was taking place across Egypt against their tyrant ruler Hosni Mubarak, the former Israeli defense minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, told in Israeli Television "I won't be surprised if in the future you see more extremism and radical Islam and more disturbances -- dramatic changes and upheavals".[1] This is a clear manifestation of Orientalists attempting to paint Muslims with extremism, terrorism and radicalism, undermining the popular uprising of the people against the despotic rulers who have been plundering the Arab world over the years.

This paper discusses the concept of terrorism in the light of Islamic teachings and Orientalism and its traits in the understanding of scholars. After devoting some space for discussing the concepts, this paper attempts to examine how far the dominant discourses of Orientalism in the United State of America conflate Muslims and Islam with terrorism in pre and post 9/11 era attack on the U.S. and analyze what their motives are in the contemporary world.

Therefore, the following section deals with the conceptual framework on terrorism in the light of Islamic teaching to debunk the pervasive view of Orientalists on terrorism associated with Muslims, and then proceeds to define what Orientalism and its traits are to specifically examine its discourses on Muslim and Islam associated with terrorism.

Terrorism and Islam

The Chambers English Dictionary defines (2005) "terrorism" as "*the systematic and organized use of violence and intimidation to force a government or community, etc to act in a certain way or accept certain demands"*. In practice, the word is rarely applied neutrally, and is often used to exploit. Indeed, one nation's 'terrorist' may well be another's 'freedom fighter'. For example, to many in the UK, the IRA are nothing but a group of terrorists whereas for many in the US they are 'freedom fighters'; Similarly, LTTE is a terrible terrorist organization to many, whereas for many Hindus in Sri Lanka, they are 'freedom fighters'. For years Iraq's Saddam Hussain – supported by the US - had committed atrocities against Iran, but he was only labeled a 'terrorist' when he invaded oil-rich Kuwait; the Taliban and before them the Mujahideen of Afghanistan were supported by the U.S., who then left them in order to aid the Northern Alliance, announcing that their former allies were "harboring terrorism". In our world today, astonishingly, if a government terrorizes a minority and subjects them to genocide or gross abuses of human rights, as for example the Yugoslav army did in Bosnia in 1990s or the nuclear bombing by the U.S. in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is not termed terrorism. But, when ordinary citizens fight an army to defend their lives or free their land from occupation, as in Palestine, they are labeled terrorists. This selective use of the word as

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[1] See more ' *Mubarak wanted a honorable way out'* on www.presstv.com(12-02-2011)

'terrorism' associated with Islam is pervasive in the discourses of the Orientalists, which is exactly is unfortunate.

In Islam, terrorism is the slaughter or terrorizing of the innocent. As such it is categorically forbidden, since it is in direct opposite of *Islam*, which means *Peace* (JISB, 2009:3). No other faith carries the meaning of peace within its name. The word *Muslim* can be given the meaning *one who spreads peace*. Such is their importance that across the Muslim continents, people are always greeting each other with the words of *Salam*: "Peace is upon you". It is clear the similarity between the words *Islam* and *Salam* that propagate peace across the world.

Islam takes very seriously the killing of even one innocent person, in whatever context. In fact the sentence of death (penalty) for murder can be given under the Islamic legal system (or *Shariah*) after a properly conducted trial in legitimate courts. This is because life is absolutely sacred - a gift granted by God - and no one has the right to take it except God. Muhammad (PBUH) warned his companions to avoid extremes – which he explained was the cause of the destruction of earlier communities. Terrorists it appears, feel that this injunction does not apply to them. Terrorism is an act against God. Anyone who tries to justify such atrocities ultimately fails, since both the Sacred Law and theology abhor such acts as moral sins that run contrary to the essence of Islam (Yahya, 2002:10). The Qur'an instructs Muslims in times of adversity to act with justice, perseverance and patience. Terrorists apparently never think of relating their acts to the elementary principle that Islam places great value on the sanctity of human life. The following verses of Quran clearly illustrate this fact.

> *"..if anyone slays a human being, unless it be (in legalized punishment)for murder or for spreading corruption on earth, it shall be as though that person had slain the whole of humanity; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though one had saved the lives of all humanity." (*Qur'an 5: 32)

The above verse of the Quran is clearly disregarded by the fanaticism of hate by the people who are involved in this kind of heinous act. Traditional Muslim jurists considered terrorist attacks against unsuspecting and defenseless victims as heinous and immoral crimes and treated the perpetrators as the worst type of criminals (Yahya, 2002:10). Yet, the perception is that Islam is inextricably intertwined with the problem of terrorism, especially by Orientalists. In fact, militant terrorist groups have hijacked Islam as their driving force and have given it a virulent twist as they set out to impose their version of Islam (Rahman, 2009:110). As Alatas(2005) noted, on the one hand, they are lax, they do not follow Islam, they neglect Islam. On the other hand, they apply the religion, but in a wrong way without compassion, by being too harsh in their interpretations. So, it is not that there are extremist versions of Islam, but that those who are extreme, are actually transgressing the laws of God in one way or another (Alatas, 2005:44). As Tim Winter asserts, mainstream Islam will be able to make the loud declaration in public that it already feels in its heart:

that terrorists are not Muslims. Targeting civilians is a negation of every possible school of Sunni Islam'.[2] It is in this context that it should be noted that the Muslims on the whole oppose and condemn terrorism in unequivocal terms and are not ready to accept it even as remotely related to Islam in any manner.

Orientalism and its traits

In the preceding section, the concept of terrorism was described in terms of Islamic teachings. This section sheds light on Orientalism as a concept and its basic traits in the understanding of scholars so that the paper can later examine its dominant discourses from the U.S. on the association of Islam with terrorism. In fact, Orientalism is all about a mode of thinking about the 'other' the Orient (Eeasterners) by the Westerners. In their epistemological division of West and East, Westerners perceive a kind of positional superiority in their discourses in relation to the East in all aspects that include politics, economics and socio-culture. In other words, Orientalism can also be defined as the way in which non-Western cultures are perceived in the West, by scholars, writers, thinkers, politicians and society at large. Sered defines it in his article as "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient" (Sered, 1996:1). This is clearly evident in the narrative of Said, who was one of the first scholars to systematically analyze Orientalism and its imagery of Muslim world. My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge(Said,1979:204).Said also emphasizes that it is a "systematic discipline by European culture (is) able to manage –and even produce– the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively"(Ibid:204).This inferior notion of the Orient is sustained, and the Orient subsequently becomes an idea with a corresponding reality, while cultural hegemony gives Orientalism its durability and influence to create the positional superiority of West, which effectively perpetuates false consciousness about the 'Other'. In short, it constructs Orient as the 'other' of Europe or the West, which in turn confirms Europe's or the Western dominant position. More importantly, 'the Orient was Orientalized not because it was discovered to be "Oriental"... but because it could be –that is submitted to being– made Oriental' (Ibid: 204).

As for the traits of Orientalism, Alwee(2005) itemizes the following.

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[2] See this http://66.34.131.5/ISLAM/ahm/recapturing.htm

1. Stereotyping/biasness – continuous stereotyping of the Orient; they take on an essentialist and paternalistic approach.

2. Being ahistorical in perspective- assumes society is static and ignores socio-historical factors that continually shape the societies.

3. Textualist- assumes society can be studied through literature/language in the text per se and disregards reality

4. Reductionist in explanation- reduces totality to a specific, that is instead of looking at social, cultural or political institutions and conceptualize myths.

5. Averse in applying insights or methodology of the social science into their study

6. Dichotomising of East and West- Compared East as non-equal and assume they only can copy Western rule of thumb. And finally

7. Its selective nature of subject matter, while others are marginalized or silenced

These are some of the traits that provide an impetus for Orientalists to demonize Muslims and Arab as terrorists in their discourses. As Edward Said puts it "Today Islam is defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam. So long as this framework stands, Islam, as a vitally lived experience for Muslims, cannot be known" (Said, 1981:155).

The following section deals with the way in which Muslims are portrayed as terrorists in the Orientalists' discourses in pre-9/11 era.

Portrayal of Muslims and Islam by Orientalists in Pre- 9/11 Era

The simplistic images of nasty Arabs and backward Muslims are deeply ingrained in Western Orientalists' discourses with the support of above mentioned traits even before 9/11 attack. As such, Progler(2005) narrates in his account that "while this American attitude toward Arabs and Muslims was evident in the public portrayal of the events stemming from 9-11, the pattern of behavior also brings to mind earlier incidents, in which Muslims were publicly framed as terrorists"(Progler,2005:59). For instance, immediately after the bomb blast in Oklahoma city in 1995, the U.S. media corporate agencies, media pundits, academic and policy analysts put the blame on 'Islamic terrorists' without thoroughly investigating the incident to identify who the culprits were. Then, when a suspect associated with the U.S. military movement was arrested in connection with this incident, public attention was slowly shifted from Islamic militant to domestic terrorism. The whole news items took a u-turn portraying it as 'tragedy' in Oklahoma. This is a clear manifestation to get a sense of how Western Orientalists conditioned or compounded Muslims and Islam with terrorism.

Furthermore, the U.S.'s portrayal of Arab and Muslims as terrorists emerged from the Persian Gulf War in 1990-1991. When Bush took the decision to invade Iraq, the U.S. media, academic experts and journalists, who ignored Saddam Hussein when he served the American strategic interest in his war against Iran, mimicked portraying the simplistic depiction of bad Arab and Muslims. Similarly, the U.S. provided arms and training to 'freedom fighters' (Mujahideen) in Afghanistan in 1990s against Soviet Russia. When the freedom fighters were reluctant to hand over the Caspian Sea energy resources development to US and make of their ally Saudi Arabia nervous, the U.S. shifted its policy from 'freedom fighters' in Afghanistan to 'Islamic terrorists'. It is not incorrect to say that the U.S. alters their policy towards Muslims and Arabs as terrorists based on their personal interest or agenda. In this context, anti-Arab racism is "mainly an effect and reflection of interest and policy rather than a causal factor... Arabs who cooperate with the West... are not subject to racist epithets and stereotypes" "(Progler,2005:66).

Some scholars trace the demonization of Muslims and Arabs as terrorists with the establishment of Israel on the land of Palestine. This is partly because of the resistance shown by Arabs towards the establishment of Jewish state in Palestine. Prominent Arab American scholars like Edmund Ghareeb (1983), Jack Shaheen (1984) and Michael Suleiman (1988) have consistently found stereotypical images of Arabs in American media culture since the establishment of Israel on the land of Palestine in 1948"(Ibid:65). A notable book on, *The Arab Mind,* written by the Zionist scholar Raphael Patai in 1983 depicted Palestinians or Arabs as guerillas, commandos, lazy and sex-obsessed(Ibid:70-71). This work of Patai is fairly representative of reductionist academic discourse of Orientalist in the 1980s that demonizes Muslims and Arabs as 'terrorists' and 'others'.

In addition, some scholars are of the view that the demonization of Muslims and Islam in the Western discourses emerged from Crusades. In that vein, Progler asserts in his work that "many of these devised myths were born of the Crusades and further bolstered during the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries. The Muslim world has been a self-reflecting mirror for Western civilization, in which the West continues to define and re-define itself by constructing and remaking an Other that is everything the West is not" "(Progler,2005:81).

By and large, the most important point about Orientalism as a discourse is that it is premised on prejudice and stereotypes of Islam that is represented in Orientalist ways, as can be readily seen from an observation in the West of advertisements, consumer products, pop fiction, Las Vegas souvenirs, and architecture (Alatas, 2005:47).

Portrayal of Muslims and Islam by Orientalists post 9/11 era

The dynamics of demonizing Muslims and Arabs as terrorists accelerated rapidly and more vigorously in the post 9/11 era. Right after the attack on World Trade Centre in New York and Pentagon in Washington DC on 11th September 2001, the American Corporate Media promptly proclaimed that it was the work of "Palestine Terrorists" without even analyzing the incident"(Progler,2005:81). The U.S. television broadcasted its images and stories of "Arab and Muslim terror" flashing on their news. It can be noted here how hasty the U.S. corporate media were in promptly demonizing Muslims or Arabs as terrorists. This stands as a clear testimony of the typical Orientalists' discourse on 9/11, portraying Muslims as terrorists. Later, it was pinned on Osama Bin Laden, former Cold War ally of the U.S. in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. However, it should be noted here that some scholars indicated that the 9/11 attack was an inside job of the conspiracy theory of US as it had many suspicions and controversies, and they suggested that there was no involvement of Muslim or Islamic Jihadist movement in the incident"(Progler,2005:55-56).

Nevertheless, this tragic incident provides a room for Christian Zionists, who are predominantly strong in the U.S. lobby against Islam and Muslim living across the world, to accuse the Muslims as terrorists"(Progler,2005:56).

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, Muslims had to pay a heavy price, not only in the U.S., but all over the world. There were half a dozen murders and hundreds of hate crimes in the first week after the attacks. By the end of September, according to some accounts, nearly 1500 Arabs and Muslims had been detained by law enforcement and immigration authorities (Progler, 2005:56). CNN and Newsweek suggested that truth serum or even torture should be used to interrogate "suspected terrorists" and pundits called on the Arab- American community to police itself and remarked "not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorist are Muslims"(Ibid:56). This is a gross generalization of Orientalists that reveal prejudice, stereotyping and biasness in analyzing factors that impede the growth of the Muslims and Arabs because they perceive Islam as a religion that produces terrorists in the world, not the other religions. In addition, reminiscent of a Hollywood epic, the corporate news media adopted catchy slogans like "America Strikes Back" and images of "bearded and barbarous Muslims"(Ibid:56). The worst part of the scenario was the declaration of 'Crusades' by the the U.S. president George W. Bush on 16th September 2001, days after the September 11th terrorist attacks: "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while" (Ibid: 57). These are all concrete manifestations of Orientalists' discourses on the demonization of Muslims and Islam associated with terrorism in the aftermath post 9/11 attack.

It should also be noted that the American media portrayed that Arab violence as a terrorism and thus they are irrational. It does not necessarily delineate which criteria they make such projections or accusations. It is quite natural for people to show resistance when their houses are looted or their lands are plundered by outsiders. In this context, when Arabs or Muslims show resistance to the occupation of their

land by Israel, they are considered terrorists or irrational by Orientalists. This is an irrational justification of Orientalism.

To put it another way, when an Israeli is killed, it is referred as a 'Muslim terrorist attack', however, when Israelis slaughter Muslims or Arabs indiscriminately, it is referred to as a 'retaliation' in the Orientalists' discourse. In that sense, Orientalists have reduced the sum of all Arab and Muslim actions to be pejorative, while the Israelis are always cast as the protagonists. These are all typical manifestations and totalizations of Orientalists about Muslims and Arabs which contravenes rationality.

Furthermore, Hollywood's movies often stereotypes Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. In "The Siege" Arab jihadists came to New York, blew up Times Square and kidnapped school children (Alatas, 2005:43). With that, the Western media tends to portray Islam as oppressive (women in *hijab*); that Islam is out-moded (hanging, beheading and stoning to death); anti-intellectual (book burning); restrictive (ban on post- and extra-marital affairs, alcohol and gambling); extremist (Algeria, Lebanon and, Egypt); backward (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan); causes conflict (Palestine, Kashmir and Indonesia); and dangerous (Iran)(Ibid:46). This also stands as a clear testimony of the Orientalist perspective on Muslims perpetuating them as terrorists.

The dichotomy of Muslims as moderate and extremist is a creation of Orientalists. In their understanding moderate Muslims are less religious and more knowledgeable of IT civilization and extremist Muslims are more prone to violence and terrorism. By dichotomizing Muslims into two fractions, Orientalists blame extremists for all the terrorist activities and condition the moderate to reform the extremists.

Many of the researchers have debunked the phenomenon of terrorism intertwined with Muslims, Muslim religious institutions or theological interpretation of Islam. Segeman's findings and Abou Zahab and Roy's study (2004) show that militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan had little relation to avowed religious ideology although they claim that they are a part of *Ummah*(Rahman,2009:121-122). The different ideology of these terrorist groups does not attract the attention of Orientalists yet.

It is in this context, it is necessary to examine the factors that contribute towards Orientalists' demonization of Muslims and Arabs as terrorists in the world. Among many factors, some of them are categorized as follows.

- Islam is considered an ideological factor to the West that can even challenge the Western ideology associated with capitalism and socialism
- To officially extend the support to Israel

- Lack of understanding in the fundamentals of Islam, Islamic Shariah law and fatwa

- To squeeze their vast resources of Arab or Muslim World

- To rule over them

- To impose the Western ideology in the Arab and Muslim World and to distort the mushrooming domestic tension in their own countries.

Due to space constraints, it is therefore, not possible to examine all the factors in detail that contribute to Orientalists' discourses to perpetuate the negative image of Muslims. However, the aforementioned factors stand as a concrete testimony of the typical negative portrayal of Orientalists on association of Islam and Muslims with terrorism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having examined the concepts on terrorism in the light of Islamic teachings and Orientalists' discourses on Islamic terrorism pre and post 9/11 era, it becomes clear how biased and stereotypical Orientalists are in demonizing Islam and Muslim as terrorists. In fact, many of the studies debunked Orientalists' view of the phenomenon of terrorism associated with Islam and Muslims and showed that the so-called Islamic militant groups have no affiliation with Islamic practices. In this context, it should be noted that terrorism is neither a monopoly of Islam nor of any religion. Islam as a religion has always been against the killings of innocent human beings and has prohibited killings of children, women or elderly people even during the war waged against Muslims by others.

It is our unfortunate that these perpetrators of various terrorist acts carry Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jewish names. The truth is that even if terrorists have Muslim identities, the terror they perpetrate cannot be labelled "Islamic terror", just as it could not be called "Hindu terror" if the perpetrators were Hindus or "Christian terror" if they were Christians. That is because murdering innocent people or unleashing violence and terrorists activities in the name of religions is always unacceptable in any religion. In this context, it should be stressed here neither a terrorism is a religious issue nor has it to be associated with religion in whatever circumstances. The above mentioned terrorist groups may have different ideologies as they are sectarian groups (fighting for rights or recognition) in their contexts. In that vein, unleashing terrorist activities by these groups should be analyzed based on their political or sectarian discourses. It should not unnecessarily be associated with any religion. However, Orientalists are selective in their reporting on religious extremism or terrorism, especially associated with Islam. On the other hand, there is little on

Jewish, Christian and secular extremism that would serve to provide a more balanced view of the problem, that is, to show that the problem is not restricted to Muslims. In this context, it is believed that this attempt of stereotyping or caricaturing of Muslims and eventually Islam associated with terrorism is an obvious manifestation of Western Orientalists.

As long as the problem of terrorism is perceived by Orientalists and reflected in their discourses as closely rooted in theological interpretation of Islam, little can be done to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between the non-Muslims and Muslims. In other words, harboring prejudice, stereotype, hatred, demonization and racism against Muslims associated with terrorism should be circumvented by the Orientalists provided that there has to be a unity and social cohesion among different ethnic communities across the globe.

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