

The Long View

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Security,
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Faisal Bodi
Finding Happiness:
New Ways to Break
Housing Crisis

**Ramzy Baroud and
Romana Rubeo**
The PA's Impossible Choice
in the Age of the Lions' Den

**Imam Achmad
Cassiem**
The Foundation of
Islamic Unity

Arzu Merali
Revisiting Ideas of Islam,
Women's Liberation
and Equality

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

The turbulence of the current time – from the cost of living crisis to the endless killing of and violence against Palestinians (most recently the shooting and murder of two-year-old Muhammed Tamimi) by Israeli forces – can leave one feeling hopeless. The prospects for change seem distant, not for lack of innovation but lack of willpower by those with (some modicum) of power.

This issue touches on this – both the despondence but also the changes in fortune as people at the grassroots organise. Such organisation is tackling economic structures that conspire to keep people off the property ladder in countries like the UK. It is resisting the oppressions created not just by regimes like the Israeli one but their clients like the Palestinian Authority (PA). It involves overcoming the divide and rule mentality internalised by generations of formerly colonised people. It requires the confidence in faith and belief that different ways of governance and rights can be imagined and implemented.

In our lead article, **Faisal Bodi** looks at the dearth of halal housing options in the UK and by extension other Western countries. It provides an analysis of the ethical dilemmas posed by conventional mortgages as a route to home ownership (in particular for Muslims), a history of solutions and the impact of a housing market of spiralling prices and an economy squeezing not just lower but also middle-income earners. Bodi's research shows that not only are families and individuals priced out of the housing market – something that affects working class Muslims and racialised communities disproportionately – they were also confronted with a paucity of appropriate rental stock. Overcrowding in private or the ever diminishing and scarce social housing sector as well as extortionate rental prices, have been driving a silent but deepening crisis in Muslim and many communities of colour. The first wave of supposedly Islamic finance solutions, aimed at Muslims struggling with the ethics of conventional borrowing, did little to help and in some cases were more risky and burdensome for borrowers.

Despite this state of affairs, new ways of managing the principles of borrowing money for the sake of home ownership, whilst navigating Islam's strict prohibition on interest, have come into being. These are the result of community driven demands and initiatives that deal with the problems of long-term indebtedness and unequal distribution of risk – both key detriments of the previous models. However, on their own they cannot solve the problem. Whilst state structures have consistently worked against tackling the

housing crisis per se and the particularities of the crisis facing Muslims and others, it is clear that where the community and committed individuals within it have a will, there is a way. As Bodi argues, access to appropriate housing is a part of a basic right to safety and security and part of the Islamic understanding of happiness.

The obstacles that prevent Palestinians from enjoying these and other basic rights are the subject of **Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo's** piece. In particular they analyse the trajectory of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as its standing as anything other than an enforcer of Israeli apartheid diminishes amongst the people of the West Bank. The proliferation of new resistance groups, including the Lion's Den, is forcing the PA to change its public discourse to one of resistance and defiance. This discourse flies in the face of the PA's role in effectively enforcing the Israeli occupation, as well as being a corrupt and abusive body, much criticised for its own violations of Palestinians rights. Baroud and Rubeo chart the rise of a Palestinian resistance that is uniting people across traditional factions – political, social and geographical – and leaving the PA's position increasingly parlous. It seems that the Palestinian polity is breaking free of both Israeli fetters, and the Palestinian institutions and NGOs that were created in the wake of the Oslo Accords of the 1990s whose role (for various reasons) has been to normalise and institutionalise the occupation.

Imam Achmad Cassiem's piece is an extract from his book, *The Quest for Unity*. In it, he uses Quranic *ayaat* and hadith to emphasise the obligation of unity between Muslims. As the Hajj approaches, these words carry much weight. As the essays in this issue show, where unity is fomented, change quickly follows.

Our final piece from **Arzu Merali**, is a reflection on her journey as a writer on and activist for women's rights. Merali observes that since she started in this field, the discourse on rights and Islam has stagnated in ways that serve dominant and oppressive culture of misogyny. She argues that Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular need to challenge the way genuine issues of justice and equity have been subsumed in gender stereotypes.

There can be no just resolution for the ills our world faces without understanding that institutions, languages and everyday norms are sometimes the very things that hold us back, even when they claim to be the solutions to our problems. These are the urgent conversations and actions we need. Let's refocus.

Join the conversation by emailing us on info@ihrc.org, tweeting @ihrc or find us on Facebook. We now also record podcasts and videos called The Long View Conversations looking into the deeper issues raised by multiple essays with some of our authors. You can find these at www.ihrc.org.uk/video-multimedia/ We are now also recording some of our essays so you can listen to them on the go. Find them in the same section.

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Editors:
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Arzu Merali**

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Finding Happiness: New Ways to Break the Housing Crisis

The UK housing crisis has detrimentally impacted racialised minorities more than most. For Muslims, the private sector has struggled to offer genuine solutions presented by an interest-based economy while structural racism continues to block their access to the public sector. **Faisal Bodi** surveys the Muslim housing scene and broaches possible ways forward.

The news that runaway house prices are finally in retreat would normally be met with a sigh of relief from those hoping to get their foot onto the property ladder. After two decades of soaring property prices, buffered only by the blip of the 2008 international banking crisis, the runaway train that is the [UK housing market is showing signs of reversing](#). All things being equal, this should usher in an era of affordability for those currently locked out. However, high inflation in the wider economy and concomitant interest rate hikes mean that home ownership remains out of reach for most prospective, particularly, first time buyers.

For Muslims, especially those who abide by Islam's proscription of interest-based instruments, the euphemistically named, politically created "cost of living crisis" is an even bigger hammer blow as their finances are stretched by higher rents and living expenses, hitting their ability to save and buy a home outright. The scale of the affordability crisis is unprecedented. The average house in the UK currently costs around nine-times average annual earnings. The last time [house prices were this expensive relative to average earnings](#) was in the year 1876, nearly 150 years ago. There are regional variations with London as one might expect being the most unaffordable (12 times earnings) and the figure decreasing as one moves north. In the 1990's this ratio stood at just above three. The average house price is currently £260,000. In 1990 this figure stood at just under £58,000.

What is it that has brought us to this point? The main culprit is not economic but political. For the last 20 years, successive governments of all the main political hues, have maintained interest rates at levels never before seen in British history with the aim of manufacturing a false wealth consciousness among ordinary people in the shape of equity in order to garner political support. The availability of cheap money has fuelled an asset bubble in housing as ordinary people have gorged on cheap credit, eyeing an easy way to become landlords for extra income, both for the here and now and as pension pots. And because of the additional demand this has stimulated in the sector property prices have spiralled out of reach for many.

Until the 1990's the choice for Muslims in

the private sector was between renting and buying, with the social housing sector also accessible to the less well off. Renting, as I will show later, has never been an attractive option for Muslims in Britain. This left conventional interest-based mortgages as the only available option. To address the problem, some Muslim scholars in the west opined that the shariah proscription on usury - one of the seven major sins in Islam - could be waived, providing certain conditions were met, for individuals who wanted to purchase a home on the basis of the jurisprudential principle of *haajah* or "general need". A *fatwa* issued in 1999 by the European Council for Fatwa and Research is representative of this exemption. "It should be restricted to the category of people who are in real need for a house. However, the fatwa does not cover taking up a mortgage to buy a house for commercial reasons or for purposes other than buying a personal house for those who do not have one," it reads. This provided a welcome lifeline to Muslims who would otherwise find themselves trapped in the rental merry go round and effectively paying off other people's mortgages. The permission was necessarily limited in scope. It didn't cover commercial transactions leaving Muslims wishing to borrow money for investment purposes at the mercy of the traditional banking world.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so it wasn't long before alternatives sprung up offering some hope to UK Muslims. The so-called halal mortgage burst onto the scene in the 1990s to much fanfare. These shariah-compliant home purchase plans promised to fill the void and render redundant the need to rely on spiritually unpalatable bank loans. Most of them were offered by Islamic or Middle Eastern banks but soon mainstream banking names such as HSBC and Lloyds spied an opportunity and entered the market. However, their appeal has been short-lived. Often much more expensive than their usurious counterparts they have also been criticised for failing to address the long-term indebtedness that borrowing creates and for heaping most, if not all, of the risks of the transactions, onto the purchaser. In other words, while they may be structured in a way that meets shariah requirements and thus be following the letter of the law, their effects are not entirely in keeping with its spirit or objectives. It is perhaps a

sign of the decreasing popularity of "halal mortgages" with consumers that the biggest names like Al-Rayan as well as HSBC and Lloyds no longer offer these loans.

The next-gen products that have replaced them seek to address some of the shortcomings of their predecessors, particularly the problems of long-term indebtedness and unequal distribution of risk. They allow prospective home buyers to purchase on the open market in what are essentially variations on a shared ownership model. This involves the consumer buying a portion of the equity and renting the remainder with the option of scaling up the equity component over time, if they so wish. Generally speaking, these instruments seem a lot fairer for the home buyer, come with much less risk and offer more flexibility. A major attraction is that because they make profit from renting their part of the property to the customer, they require as little as a 5% downpayment making them much more accessible than the first-gen products. [Heylo Housing](#), [Strideup](#), [Gatehouse](#) and [Wayhome](#) all broadly operate along the same lines. Whether they are here to stay is difficult to say since most are still in their infancy and take-up is obviously limited by how much capital each company can raise from investors to purchase properties. Most were also conceived in an era of exceptionally low interest rates in which rents were relatively low. With rates now having almost tripled, rental prices have also gone up. And because these companies set their rents in line with market rates, this will necessarily impact affordability in a high rental price environment. Moreover, while they may solve the problem of usury, they are often still more expensive than interest-based mortgages and therefore fail to alleviate the wider shariah goal of exploitation of the vulnerable which the shariah prohibition of usury aims at.

The pressures caused by these economic headwinds are already playing out, according to research published last year by the [Muslim Census](#). This found that 70% of Muslims with a so-called Islamic mortgage reported an increase in monthly payments over the past 12 months versus only 51% of Muslims with a standard mortgage. It also found that since August 2021, Muslims with a shariah-compliant mortgage were again disproportionately impacted with 65% reporting being late

as opposed to 33% of Muslims with a conventional mortgage. “More dramatically, the former group reported always being late at a rate five times greater than those with a standard mortgage – 15% as opposed to 3%,” it revealed.

Left to the “free market”, a misnomer if ever there was one because the private sector has benefitted enormously from government subsidies and other friendly policies (leaving aside the fact that the whole global economy is politically managed), the housing market has killed itself. Rampant greed has made homes unaffordable to all but a wealthy minority. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, tweeted in May that the average terrace in London now costs £850,000 and the average private rent is £2500. The housing system in the UK is broken and the private sector, “halal finance” solutions included, to whom our politicians are beholden, is incapable of fixing it.

With the private sector increasingly unaffordable, halal or otherwise, this leaves Muslims dependent on the social housing sector for their accommodation needs. But this is also easier said than done. Since 1980, when then Conservative PM Margaret Thatcher introduced the “right to buy” scheme allowing council house tenants to buy their own homes at huge discounts to the market value, the number of council homes available has shrunk considerably. Some 2.5 million have been sold under right to buy leaving 2.2 million with another approximately two million that have been transferred into the possession of housing associations. Right to buy, effectively a Tory policy of winning Labour voters by selling them the dream of middle-class status, has been single-handedly responsible for the huge social housing deficit we see today, resulting in huge shortages in all parts of the country, multi-year waiting lists and hordes of desperate people left to rely on the open market and at the mercy of private, often rogue, landlords.

A safe secure affordable home is the basis for socio-economic wellbeing, good mental and emotional health and a happy personal and family life. The stability it provides is

foundational for success in all other areas of our existence. A spacious house is part of the Muslim’s happiness, says a hadith of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). Overcrowding, squalor, unaffordability, racist areas, economically deprived and crime infested neighbourhoods are destructive and disruptive for the individual and society. Yet Muslims in the UK are more likely to face these conditions. According to [Heath and Li](#) Muslim households are significantly more likely to be in conditions of poverty than those of other religious groups. Muslims are more likely than other groups to live in social housing, to live in private rented accommodation, and are less likely to own their own homes. Writing in 2021, Raleigh and Holmes found that [rates of household overcrowding in Britain](#) are highest in Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African, and Arab households.

In May this year, a [special investigation](#) by the Independent revealed that over 80% of Black and Asian renters have been forced to live in conditions of disrepair over the past 12 months, compared with less than three in five white people. “Even starker is the difference in treatment by property owners. While 18 per cent of white renters said they had experienced illegal acts by landlords in the past year, for non-white tenants the figure is 33 per cent. They were also more likely to be threatened with eviction in the past three years, whether they had complained about issues in their home or not,” the probe revealed.

What these statistics show is that by dint of its socio-economic profile, the UK Muslim population is more predisposed to being eligible for social housing than other ethnic and religious groups. However, this author’s personal experience in his home city of Preston shows that in reality, the community’s specific needs are wilfully ignored, leaving it unable to access this very realistic option. There are two main types of social housing tenure, renting and shared ownership. Renters can generally expect to pay well below the market rate with the added benefit of long-term security.

Shared ownership involves buying a portion of the equity in the property and paying a discounted rent on the part that remains in

the possession of the landlord, with the option over time of scaling up or staircasing and buying more of the equity, in some cases up to 100%. This is an attractive option for people who want to save to buy their own home as the relatively lower rental payments allow them to save more of their income to purchase equity, and they also get the security that comes from renting from a social landlord. The purchase of the equity portion is typically paid with personal savings, family loans or a mortgage, but because the equity is typically small, any mortgage is obviously more affordable and involves paying less interest. Both these options are targeted at people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. In theory at least, they offer a genuine but little explored alternative for Muslims wishing to eschew interest-based loans and private renting.

Preston is a small city of 148,000 people in the north-west of England. Most of its ethnic minority contingent owe their presence in the city to the post-Second World War migration from the Indian subcontinent with a smaller component hailing from the Caribbean. They formed the backbone of the workforce running the cotton mills that were a major employer in the region until decline set in during the 1970’s. Broadly speaking, their descendants inhabit a ring around the city centre, a geographical circle which is expanding as the population increases. Some 19% of the city’s population live in socially rented housing. However, there is plenty of evidence to show that the Asian population (I am forced to use this designation as only “ethnic” categories are employed by the social housing providers, however it is broadly representative of Muslims as most of Preston’s Muslims are of south Asian heritage and the overwhelming majority of South Asians are Muslims) is getting a raw deal.

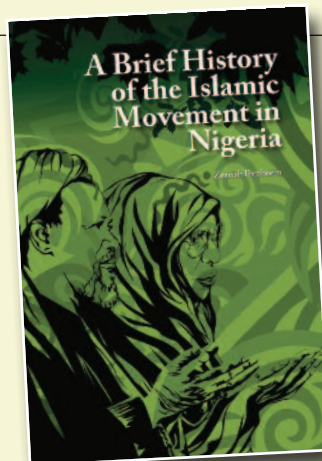
Twenty-three years ago, Ashiana Housing Association, which operated in north-west England in the 1990s and 2000’s, carried out quite an extensive survey of Asian housing needs in Preston. The study looked at the attitudes of the town’s (Preston only received city status in 2002) BME community to-

NEW PUBLICATION

A Brief History of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria

By Zeenah Ibrahim

Available from shop.ihrc.org



As a senior member of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Zeenah Ibraheem's history of it is a first-hand account, not just of its ideas, and their fruition, but some of the many turmoils and persecutions it has faced in the last four decades.

This book covers some of the key incidents in the movement's history, including the Funtua Declaration, as well as the Zaria Massacres of 2014 and 2015.

wards shared ownership, and the potential demand for such schemes. One presumes the need for it arose from at least the realisation that authorities weren't adequately catering for this segment of the community. Between February 1999 and January 2000 trained interviewers, able to communicate in Gujrati, Urdu and Punjabi interviewed 135 households. The survey's most startling finding was that overcrowding was common in Asian households, with over 30% of the households interviewed containing six or more occupants. It also found there was a lack of awareness about shared ownership among the Asian community and this may have a bearing on the true extent of demand for this form of housing provision. The survey concluded that there was a demand for larger three, four and five bedroom houses in specific areas.

Ashiana no longer exists, having been swallowed up by a mainstream housing association. One can only speculate as to why the survey focussed on shared ownership as opposed to renting, but this author's educated guess is that it is because Asians in general are more averse to renting than the general population. This is borne out by national statistics showing that despite being rooted to the bottom of the socio-economic scale, in relative terms the Asian community has the highest rate of home ownership of any ethnic group. Whatever the reason for this preference, it would make the Muslims among them who typically suffer from low income, overcrowding, larger families and have an aversion to usury, prime candidates for shared ownership. Yet, in Preston, this community has barely figured in the decision-making of the major housing providers. Their situation reflects the experience of Muslim communities elsewhere. In May this year, the [Observer reported](#) that dozens of Somali families in the London borough of Tower Hamlets were taking legal action against their council after accusing it of corruption and racism. "The families, all of whom are Somali, claim they have been systemically removed from housing waiting lists by Tower Hamlets council due to their race, and some have been placed in

severely unfit and unsafe homes that doctors say posed a major risk to their health... Most of the families taking legal action have been on the housing waiting list for several years, with some waiting more than a decade – far longer than the periods the council claimed are normal" said the report.

As of August 2021, there were only 230

This is not to suggest that social housing is a panacea for the Muslim community's housing difficulties. There is a chronic shortage of social/affordable housing in the UK (caused in the main by right to buy) and until that is addressed the problem of undersupply will continue to constrain choice.

social housing dwellings in Preston that had four or more bedrooms. Only 16 of these had five or more bedrooms. They make up less than two percent of the total social housing stock in the city. The last major shared ownership development in the city went up 20 years ago. Since then, the vast majority of new developments have consisted of mainly 2-bed and 3-bed rental properties. It is little surprise then that the tenancy roll of the largest social housing provider in Preston, Community Gateway Association, (responsible for approximately half of the city's total social housing stock), contains relatively few Asians, just three percent by the organisation's own admission, even though they make up 20.2% of the city's total population.

Why the situation has been left to deteriorate to this degree is anyone's guess but it does lend itself to accusations of structural racism. Certainly, a scan of the make-up of the governing boards of the half a dozen main housing associations in Preston reveals that there are hardly any Asian or Muslim representatives. They are also oblivious to Muslim

needs which is why together with concerned local councillors and activists I formed an engagement group to apply some pressure for change. We organised a jointly developed survey of Muslim housing needs in the city in 2022 which returned broadly the same findings as the Ashiana survey in 2000. Among the main findings were that only 5.4% of respondents were in social housing but 20% were on the social housing register, suggesting once again that not enough of the right type and tenure of homes are being built for Asian residents. Another problem that is perhaps not particular to Preston is that most of the new build social housing is unappealing to Asians as it is going up in the outskirts of the city far from existing communities and amenities such as places of worship, madrasas and shops.

This is not to suggest that social housing is a panacea for the Muslim community's housing difficulties. There is a chronic shortage of social/affordable housing in the UK (caused in the main by right to buy) and until that is addressed the problem of undersupply will continue to constrain choice. Nationally, about 1.2 million households are on waiting lists for social housing, the highest number since 2016. In Preston, approximately 1050 social/affordable housing dwellings were built between 2010-2020, an average of approximately 100 units per annum. Some of these comprised the social housing component of private developments (where councils normally require developers to allocate 20-30% of the build to social housing) which are typically much more expensive than council/housing association homes. Moreover, most social housing in the city is in the form of rental properties which is not the tenure of choice for Asians.

Nor is it to suggest that the housing problems faced by Muslims are all externally caused. In places like Preston, where Asian areas once meant cheaper housing (caused by white flight), the establishment of settled communities with amenities now means they go for a premium and often buck the local/national price trend. This has been exacerbated by Muslim carpetbaggers who

British Muslims' Expectations of the Government (BMEG)

Volume 1 Volume 2 Volume 3 Volume 4 Volume 5 Volume 6

Based on extensive UK wide survey work, this project presented Muslim demands and expectations to the UK government with a view to encouraging good policy and counteracting the rising tide of societal and institutional Islamophobia.

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have shamelessly capitalised on the demand to buy multiple properties, taking advantage of cheap interest rates. They have put these homes up for rent, effectively leaving the economically most vulnerable to pay off their mortgages. This demand from landlords has meant that house prices in Muslim neighbourhoods, near to mosques and madrasas, are now often higher than in the leafier, well to do suburban areas. The upshot has been to price the less well-off members of the community from the local home ownership market.

Changes at the national level in social housing policy may present an opportunity for Muslims to get on the housing ladder more easily. On 17 October 2019 the Government announced a new Right to Shared Ownership (RTSO) which reduces the minimum equity stake required from buyers from 25% to 10%, with the right to buy further shares over time. Taking the example of a £150,000 home, buyers will only need to put up £15,000 as opposed to a more prohibitive £37,500. This will bring shared ownership homes within the reach of more low-income households, in many cases obviating the need to resort to loans. The RTSO will apply to homes delivered by the Affordable Housing Programme (AHP) 2021-26 which originally promised to deliver 180,000 new homes over the period, 50% on discounted rent but 50% in the form of affordable housing with the majority of the latter being shared ownership. However, as with most other promises made by the current government (more police, more hospitals...) we will have to wait to see how many new units are genuinely added to the country's affordable housing stock. The government has already reduced its target from 180,000 to 157,000 in the face of spiralling inflation and building costs, forcing the House of Commons [public accounts committee to warn](#) last December that it "does not seem to have a grasp" of the risks ahead.

Muslims in Britain have expended a disproportionate amount of effort and resources into developing private models of "halal finance" to facilitate home buying. Some of our brightest young minds have migrated to the

sector from other professions and indeed mainstream finance. Under their leadership, Islamic finance is developing apace but because it demands profits for its investors and operates in a broken market it can only provide a very small part of the answer to our housing needs. More fundamentally, because Islamic finance operates as a sub-system within a larger western economic system predicated on interest-based credit it fails to address the endemic inequalities that the latter causes. Carving out "halal" safe spaces in a haram environment should only offer a temporary solution but the explosion of Islamic finance in the last four decades risks making "halal mortgages" a more permanent feature.

It is clear to this author that if we are to safeguard future generations from the dangers of housing insecurity, squalor and usury we must start to focus more of our energies on accessing and developing the not-for-profit sector. In the first instance this means pressuring local providers into meeting Muslim needs. From our own experience in Preston, housing equality can only be achieved by organising, lobbying and campaigning.

But above and beyond that we also need to establish our own not for profit schemes to make home ownership more affordable and not exploitative. There do not currently appear to be any 0% financing options for homes offered by any institutions that claim to be 'Islamic'. However, as Jibril Latif pointed out in 2015 (Just Money and Interest: Moving Beyond Islamic Banking by Reframing Discourses) 0% financing has existed in other spheres of exchange for decades. Citing Burton (2008) he gives the example of JAK Members Bank (JAK Medlemsbank), an authentic interest-free institution in Sweden that gives interest-free home loans to its 38,000 plus members, while operating under the following principles:

- Charging interest is inimical to a stable economy
- Interest causes unemployment, inflation, and environmental destruction
- Interest moves money from the poor to the rich

- Interest favours projects which yield high profits in the short term (short-term thinking)

Latif states: "Admittedly, JAK is not highly profitable; it only survives on co-op like yearly dues as it facilitates interest free financing for its members from its pool of savings. But that is exactly the point, that without ideological commitments to charging interest, credit facilitation facilities can be distribution centers for society's access to their own credit, rather than monopolies on wealth or highly profitable businesses. In recognizing the intrinsic difference here, JAK does not utilize the axiom of 'interest-free' (or riba free) to charge more than the price of the item being financed, whether it is a car or a home. Since it is possible, then, the question looms, why are Muslims unable to move beyond 'Islamic' banks and establish more of these types of ethical exchange facilities?"

Muslims in the UK donate hundreds of millions of pounds every year to charitable causes with most of it going abroad. The demands of the global ummah are pressing and manifold but there is a growing realisation that the balance needs to be tipped back a little from the overseas to the domestic. Our focus on the endless foreign causes demanding our support has distracted us from establishing truly Islamic alternatives that serve our own communities. Along with an unhealthy obsession with profit it has become a stumbling block to helping the poor and vulnerable. It is high time that we start the task of making truly shariah-compliant and affordable housing a reality. The money is there, the expertise is there, as is the need. The question is, do we have the will?

Faisal Bodi

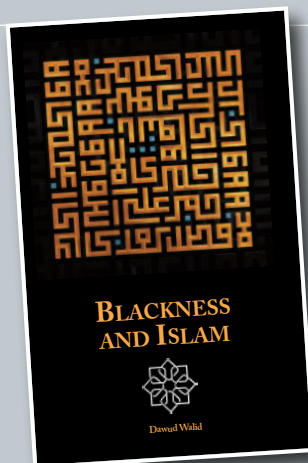
is one of the editors of The Long View, and IHRC's press officer. He has worked as a journalist in both the print and broadcast media specialising in Muslim affairs. During a journalistic career spanning some 15 years Faisal wrote extensively for the Guardian and also worked for the BBC and Aljazeera.

From Algorithm

Blackness and Islam

By Imam Dawud Walid

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"Imam Dawud Walid's life's work – in his previous publications, in the present volume and over the decade that I have known him – commends him as a soldier against satanic racism and especially its most perfect historical expression: white supremacy. This volume, by framing a religious response to what must be understood as a satanic spiritual attack, should be widely read and taught."

Dr. Rudolph Bilal Ware - Associate Professor of West Africa, Islamic Knowledge & Spirituality, African Diaspora at the University of California – Santa Barbara

The Palestinian Occupation Authority

The PA's Impossible Choice in the Age of the Lions' Den

Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo analyse the changing dynamics of Palestinian politics, in particular the trajectory of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as its standing as anything other than an enforcer of Israeli apartheid diminishes amongst the people of the West Bank

When a leading member of the Islamic Jihad resistance movement, Khader Adnan died following a prolonged hunger strike in an Israeli prison on May 2, Palestinian Authority officials issued fiery statements. Condemning Israel, the PA Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, went as far as [describing](#) Adnan's death as a "deliberate assassination" by Israel.

If one is to closely follow the political discourse emanating from the PA in Ramallah, one would mistake the PA leadership for a resistance group, not as the very entity that has historically served as the middleman between Palestinian Resistance and the Israeli military occupation.

For Israel, and the United States, the PA continues to serve a fundamental role, helping Israel secure its illegal settlements in occupied Palestine while lessening direct confrontation between Palestinian resisters and Israel. The PA, especially under the leadership of its President Mahmoud Abbas, has succeeded in fulfilling this role to the extent that even when the former US administration of Donald Trump withheld annual funds allocated to the PA, it [refrained](#), at least initially, from withholding the \$75 million usually provided by Washington to the so-called 'security coordination' - the apparatus which allows the PA and the Israeli military to jointly manage the occupation of the West Bank.

On the other hand, the PA is the [largest employer](#) of Palestinians, providing an estimated 150,000 [posts](#) in the Occupied Territories. This has allowed the PA to maintain its balancing act whereby it poses as a US ally, a trusted partner for Tel Aviv, but also the main outlet for Palestinian employment and thus everyday survival. With stubbornly high unemployment within a highly dependent economic model, even Palestinians who are frustrated with the PA endemic corruption and collaboration with Israel still line up every month to receive badly needed employment checks.

That paradigm however has proved unsustainable for several years. A new generation of Palestinians seems dissatisfied with the socio-economic equation which has

been in operation since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, soon after the signing of the Oslo Accords. This generational shift has been apparent with the rise of the Jerusalem Intifada - also called the [knife Intifada](#) - in 2015, largely individual acts of young Palestinians attacking Israeli occupation soldiers in seemingly desperate cries against the ongoing injustices. That Intifada did not last for long, however, as it lacked the collective social elements which often sustain such uprisings. Many young Palestinians were killed during that time, many of them reportedly shot by trigger-happy Israeli soldiers without any evidence that soldiers' lives were being threatened in the first place.

Just as Israel felt that a potential third Intifada was eliminated altogether, and as security coordination between the Israeli military and the PA continued unhindered, a succession of events starting in occupied Palestinian East Jerusalem - particularly in the neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan - ignited a much larger confrontation. As Israeli bulldozers were readying to demolish Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem amid settler and police violence, Gaza launched rocket attacks against Israel. A new form of resistance model soon followed, involving every Palestinian city and town, not only in Occupied Palestine, but in Israel, or what is known as Palestine 48 areas.

These events were crystallized in the [May 2021 Unity Intifada](#), a watershed moment in the history of the Palestinian struggle. Following years of discord, disunity, and near complete separation between Gaza and the West Bank, the new Intifada restored the Palestinian discourse to a degree of cohesiveness and centrality unwitnessed since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority.

Aware of the significance of the moment, the PA desperately tried to find a middle ground, elevating its rhetoric that targets the Palestinian people to appear as if a revolutionary force, while working discreetly with Israel as if little had changed on the ground. This mission became even more difficult and complicated with the rise of the

Lions' Den Brigades and other non-factional armed groups in the West Bank: More difficult because the PA's responsibility towards Tel Aviv and Washington entailed that its security forces must help Israel in fighting these groups so that they may not spread beyond Nablus and Jenin to the rest of the West Bank; and complicated by the fact that many of these fighters are also members of Fatah's own armed wing, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

Fatah is the largest party in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The PA was largely found as a replacement for the more unifying political structure of the PLO; and Fatah has historically dominated both. The rebellion within Fatah has been brewing for years, but Abbas, with Israel's help, has managed to eliminate much of the competition. With Mohammed Dahlan, a corrupt warlord [living](#) in exile in the United Arab Emirates, and Marwan Barghouti, a popular Fatah leader locked up in an Israeli prison [for 21 years](#), Abbas and his small circle of Fatah allies have dominated Fatah, the PLO, the PA and every aspect of Palestinian decision-making.

Desperate to end the armed rebellion in Fatah, which is likely to prove consequential in the event of Abbas's demise, the PA [offered](#) the Lions' Den, the Jenin Brigades, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, among others, permanent jobs in the PA security branches. It also offered to mediate with Israel so that Tel Aviv may grant them amnesty in exchange for putting down their weapons. Though such tactics have worked to some extent in the past, this time around they failed. For the rebelling youth in the West Bank, the new armed resistance is not motivated by economic conditions, but is rather part and parcel of the changing dynamics of resistance throughout Palestine, and the rise of a strong popular movement along with a different type of collective struggle.

The Lions' Den: A New Resistance Model

In December 2022, just as Israel and even some Palestinians began talking about

the Lions' Den phenomenon in the past tense, a large number of fighters belonging to the newly formed Palestinian group [marched](#) in the old city of Nablus. Compared to the group's first [appearance](#) on September 2 of the same year, the number of fighters who took part in the rally in Nablus on December 9 was significantly larger. They were better equipped, with matching military fatigues and greater security precautions. "The Den belongs to all of Palestine and believes in the unity of blood, struggle and rifles," one fighter said in a speech, referring to the kind of collective resistance that surpasses factional interests.

Needless to say, the event was significant. Only two months earlier, then-Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz [undermined](#) the group in terms of number and influence, estimating it to be "of some 30 members" and pledging to "get our hands on them ... and eliminate them." The PA was also actively involved in suppressing the group, although using a different approach. Palestinian and Arab media [reported](#) on generous PA offers of jobs and money to Lions' Den fighters should they agree to put down their weapons.

Both the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships, however, have greatly misread the situation. They have wrongly [assumed](#) that the Nablus-born movement is a regional and provisional phenomenon that, like others in the past, can easily be crushed or bought. The Lions' Den, however, seems to have increased in numbers and has already branched out to Jenin, Hebron, the Balata Refugee Camp, and even Jericho and Bethlehem.

For Israel, but also for some Palestinians, the Lions' Den is an unprecedented problem, the consequences of which threaten to change the political dynamics in the occupied West Bank entirely. As Lions' Den insignias are now appearing in every Palestinian neighborhood throughout the Occupied Territories, the group has succeeded in [branching out](#) from a specific Nablus neighborhood - Al-Qasaba - to become a collective Palestinian experience.

A [survey](#) conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in December 2022 highlighted this phenomenon. The poll showed that 72 percent of all Palestinians support the creation of more such armed groups in the West Bank. Nearly 60 percent fear that an armed rebellion risks a direct confrontation with the PA. A whopping 79 percent and 87 percent respectively refuse the surrender of the fighters to PA forces and reject the very idea that the PA has even the right to carry out such arrests.

These numbers attest to the reality on the street, pointing to the near complete lack of trust in the PA and the belief that only armed resistance, similar to that in Gaza, is capable of challenging the Israeli occupation. These notions are driven by empirical evidence, lead among them the failure of the financially and politically corrupt PA to advance Palestinian

aspirations in any way, in addition to Israel's complete disinterest in any form of peace negotiations and the growing far-right, fascist trend in Israeli society which is directly linked to the daily violence meted out against Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

UN Middle East Envoy Tor Wennesland

Disenchanted by the PA's failed political model and increasingly impressed by the armed resistance in Gaza, a rebellion in the West Bank is simply a matter of time, in fact, arguably it is already underway

recently [reported](#) that 2022 has been "the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since ... 2005." This claim was supported by Palestinian Ministry of Health statistics, which showed that 224 Palestinians were [killed](#) by Israeli forces, including 53 children in that year alone. These numbers are likely to increase in 2023, since the right-wing government led by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already carried out many deadly raids throughout Palestine, killing well over 100 Palestinians in the first four months of 2023.

Political Breakdown

But there is more to the brewing armed rebellion in the West Bank than Israeli violence alone.

Nearly three decades after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Palestinians have achieved none of their basic political or legal rights. On the contrary, emboldened right-wing politicians in Israel are now [speaking](#) of unilateral "soft annexation" of large parts of the West Bank. None of the issues deemed important in 1993 - the status of occupied Jerusalem, refugees, borders, water, etc. - are even on the agenda today. Since then, Israel has invested more in [racial laws](#) and apartheid policies, making it an apartheid regime par excellence. Major international human rights groups have [accepted](#) and [reported](#) on the new, fully racist identity of Israel.

With total US backing and no international pressure on Israel that is worthy of mention, Palestinian society is mobilizing beyond the traditional channels of the past three decades. Despite the work of some Palestinian nongovernmental organizations, the "NGO-ization" of Palestinian society, operating on funds largely obtained from Israel's Western backers, has further accentuated class divisions among Palestinians. With

Ramallah and a few other urban centers serving as the headquarters of the PA and a massive list of NGOs, Jenin, Nablus and their adjacent refugee camps have subsisted in economic marginalization, Israeli violence and political neglect.

Disenchanted by the PA's failed political model and [increasingly impressed](#) by the armed resistance in Gaza, a rebellion in the West Bank is simply a matter of time, in fact, arguably it is already underway. What differentiates the early signs of a mass armed intifada in the West Bank from the [Jerusalem Intifada](#) of 2015 is that the latter was a series of disorganized individual acts carried out by oppressed West Bank youths, while the former is a well-organized, grassroots phenomenon with a unique political discourse that appeals to the majority of Palestinian society. And unlike the [Second Intifada](#) of 2000 to 2005, the ensuing armed rebellion is rooted in a popular base, not in the PA's security forces.

The closest historical reference to this phenomenon is the 1936-39 [Palestinian Revolt](#), led by thousands of *fellahin* - peasants - in the Palestine countryside. The last year of that rebellion witnessed a large split between the *fellahin* leadership and the urban-based political parties. History is repeating itself. And, like the 1936 revolt, the future of Palestine and the Palestinian resistance - in fact, the entire social fabric of Palestinian society is affected. But why would the PA bow down so quickly to pressure from ordinary Palestinians on the street? The answer lies in the changing political mood in Palestine.

The Palestinian Occupation Authority

In September 2022, the [arrest](#) of two Palestinian activists, including the prominent figure Musab Shtayyeh, by PA police was not the first time that its Preventive Security Service (PSS) had arrested a Palestinian wanted by Israel. In fact, this group is largely linked to the routine arrest and torture of anti-Israeli occupation activists. Several Palestinians have died in the past as a result of PSS violence, the most recent being [Nizar Banat](#), who was tortured to death in June 2021. The killing of Banat ignited a popular revolt against the PA throughout Palestine.

For years, various Palestinian and international human rights groups have criticized the PA's violent practices against dissenting Palestinian voices, quite often within the same human rights reports that are critical of the Israeli military occupation of Palestine. The Hamas government in Gaza has also received its fair share of blame. In its "World Report 2022," published in January 2023, Human Rights Watch [said](#) that "the Palestinian Authority... systematically arrests arbitrarily and tortures dissidents." This was neither the first nor the last time a human rights group had made such an accusation. The link between Israeli and Palestinian targeting of political dissidents and activists,

for the same reason, is clear to most Palestinians.

At one point, some Palestinians may have believed that the PA's role was to serve as a transition between their national liberation project and full independence and sovereignty on the ground. Nearly 30 years after the formation of the PA, however, such a notion has proved to be wishful thinking. Not only has the PA failed to achieve the coveted Palestinian state, but it has morphed into a massively **corrupt apparatus** whose existence largely serves a small class of Palestinian politicians and business people.

PA corruption and subsequent violence aside, what continues to irk most Palestinians is that the Authority, with time, became another manifestation of the Israeli occupation, curtailing Palestinian freedom of expression and carrying out arrests on behalf of the Israeli army. Many of those arrested by the Israeli military in the West Bank have experienced arrest by PA security forces, as well.

More tellingly, scenes of violent **riots** in the city of Nablus following Shtayyeh's arrest were reminiscent of riots against Israeli occupation forces in the northern West Bank city or elsewhere in occupied Palestine. Unlike previous confrontations between Palestinians and the PA police - for example, following the killing of Banat - this time the violence was widespread and involved protesters from all Palestinian political groups, including the ruling Fatah faction. Perhaps unaware of the massive collective psychological shift that has taken place in Palestine in recent years, the PA government was desperate to contain the violence.

In August 2022, the Israeli army **assassinated** Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, a prominent Fatah military commander, along with two others. Not only did the PA do little to stop the Israeli military machine from conducting further such assassinations, but six weeks later it arrested Shtayyeh, who was a close comrade of al-Nabulsi - an act which suggests direct PA complicity in the Israeli assassination of Palestinians. Interestingly, Shtayyeh is not a

member of Fatah, but a **commander** within Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Though Fatah and Hamas are meant to be intense political rivals, their political tussle seems to be of no relevance to armed Resistance groups in the West Bank.

More Palestinian resistance and Israeli/PA violence are likely to follow, for several reasons: Israel's determination to crush any armed intifada in the West Bank before it spreads across the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the looming leadership transition within the PA due to Abbas's old age, and the growing unity among Palestinians around the issue of armed and popular resistance.

Beyond the Palestinian Authority

The political mood in Palestine is clearly changing. The PA is facing its greatest legitimacy challenge to date as ordinary Palestinians seem to have moved on beyond Abbas's cliched language, empty promises and fiery but redundant speeches. To weather the storm, the PA is desperate to reinvent itself and to renew whatever minimal legitimacy it once had among occupied Palestinians. That, however, might not be possible for several reasons:

First, the PA legitimacy crisis is not a new phenomenon. Resentment with the PA has been brewing for years. One opinion poll after another **has indicated** the low regard that most Palestinians have for their leadership, for Mahmoud Abbas and particularly for the "security coordination" with Israel.

Second, the torture and death of political dissident Banat in June 2021 erased whatever patience Palestinians had toward their leadership as the 'protector' of the people and the vanguard against Israeli violence. That event, itself a culmination of many other similar events, demonstrated to Palestinians that the PA is not an ally but a direct threat.

Third, the Unity Intifada of May 2021 emboldened many segments of Palestinian society throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories. For the first time in years, Palestinians now feel united around a single slogan and are no longer hostage to the geography of politics and factions. A new generation of young Palestinians has advanced the conversation beyond Abbas, the PA and their endless and ineffectual political rhetoric.

Fourth, armed struggle in the West Bank has been growing rapidly, independent from the PA's pleas or threats. In fact, evidence of an armed intifada is growing in the Jenin and Nablus regions. What is particularly interesting, and alarming from the Israeli and PA viewpoint, about the nature of the budding armed struggle phenomenon is that it is largely led by the military wing of the ruling Fatah party, in direct cooperation with Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and other Islamist and nationalist military wings.

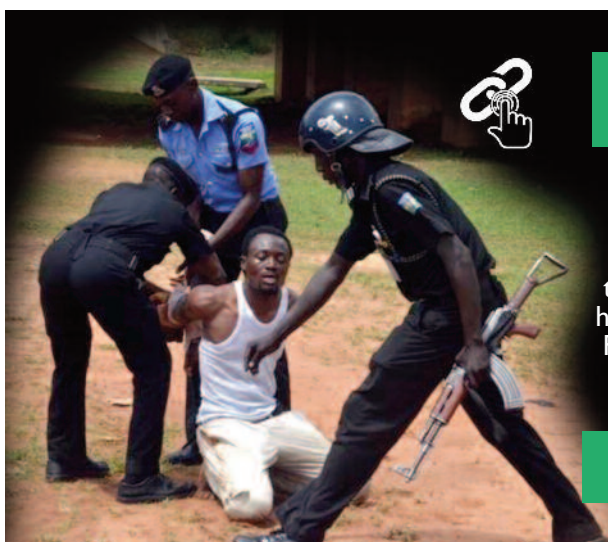
While the Israeli response to all of this can easily be gleaned from its legacy of violence, the PA's future course of action will likely determine its relationship with Israel and its Western supporters on the one hand and with the Palestinian people on the other.

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A Basic Part of Faith

The Foundation of Islamic Unity

In this extract from 'A Quest for Unity' Imam Achmad Cassiem discusses the basis of unity from Islamic sources. As Hajj approaches, his words give pause for reflection for the ummah.

The foundation of Islamic unity is Islam itself. We needn't look for any justification, outside the realm of Islam, in order to unite Muslims.

'And your Lord is one Allah: there is no deity but He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.'

[Qur'an 2:163]

Those who believe in the unity of Allah are required to submit totally to His Commands. In order to safeguard the security, the unity and solidarity of Muslims, they are not allowed to have any discretion in this regard. This prevents internecine strife and futile conflicts.

'And for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou has no part in them in the least; their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the Truth of all that they did.'

[Qur'an 6:159]

Every obligation in Islam is therefore a building block in the quest for unity. Being ignorant or unaware of certain obligations weakens the struggle for unity; neglecting certain obligations does exactly the same; being lethargic and unenthusiastic about any of our obligations retards the process of unity.

'If Muslims abandon commanding what is good and prohibiting what is bad, evil-doers will dominate over them.'

[Hadith]

'Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity. Do not be like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving clear signs: for them is a dreadful penalty...'

[Qur'an 3:104-105]

These injunctions make it an obligation upon Muslims to purge the community, the social order and the world community of everything that is non-beneficial and detrimental to it.

The Unity of Islam

'O ye who believe! fear Allah as He should be feared and die not except in a state of Islam. And hold fast altogether, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and do not be divided among yourselves.'

[Qur'an 3:102-103]

The mosques are centres dedicated to *dhikrullah*, to the remembrance of Allah, and hence they are centres of *tauheed* (unity). They definitely are not centres of division, dissension and chaos. Not only should there be no rivalry and dissension within a particular mosque, there should be no rivalry and dissension between various mosques. All mosques (*masajid*) are propagating one message - the Message of Islam, the Message of Qur'an.

All Muslims start with the same *Kalimah* (testimony), the same Qur'an, the same principles. In other words with the same ideas, values and ideals.

Because the Qur'an is essentially a Book of instructions we cannot therefore be theoretically obedient to the commands of Allah. Obedience describes a practical performance; to be obedient means **to do what needs to be done.**

The crucial importance of the following ayah cannot therefore be overemphasised:

'O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Rasul, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and his Rasul, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day; That is best and most suitable for final determination.'

[Qur'an 4:59]

Without unity there is no *Ummah*; without unity there is no discipline; without unity there is no sincerity; without unity we are powerless; without unity there is no Islam in us; and without unity there is no Islam in the community.

To unite means **to know what to unite; to know what not to unite; to know the purpose of uniting; to know the principles around which we unite.**

To know this and to commit ourselves to implementing it means we have to attain ideological unity.

Unity of Purpose

It follows, therefore, that if we have ideological unity, then we also have unity of purpose. **Sincere Muslims cannot, do not, and will not work against each other.** Unity of purpose can only be achieved through knowledge and understanding.

An invitation to Islam is an invitation to unity; a call on the people to gather, to congregate, to consolidate under the banner of Islam. **A Muslim, no matter where he resides, should promote understanding, discipline and compassion among other Muslims.**

'Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; And those who are with him are strong against the Unbelievers, (But) Compassionate amongst each other.'

[Qur'an 48:29]

It is quite obvious that any human being will support an effort if it benefits them, and if it has an excellent chance of succeeding.

We want our efforts to benefit all the oppressed people and we have a guarantee that we will succeed.

'Allah has promised, to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, that He will, of surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted to those before them; that He will establish in authority their Deen (religion) - the one which He has chosen for them; and that He will change (their state), after the fear (in which they lived) to one of security and peace: They will worship Me (alone) and not associate aught with Me. If any do reject Faith after this, they are rebellious and wicked.'

[Qur'an 24:55]

Unity of Expression

Unity of expression does not necessarily imply expression in unison; we can also have expression in harmony. We need not all say the same thing in the same words; we can say the same thing in different words or from a different perspective.

Harmony necessitates consultation and co-operation. Disharmony and disunity in expression cannot be encouraged, condoned and even tolerated in Islam. Urgent steps must be taken when this does occur.

If two parties among the Believers fall unto a quarrel, make ye peace between them: but if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the other, then fight ye (all) against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of Allah; but if it complies, then make Peace between them with Justice, and be fair: for Allah loves those who are fair (and just). The Believers are but a single brotherhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two contending brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive mercy.'

[Qur'an 49:9-10]

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least; their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did.'

[Qur'an 6.159]

Unity in Action

Unity of expression is but a form of unity in action. We may speak about unity of expression and also declare our unity of purpose, but unity in action is not something that we just speak about, but something which we must demonstrate in our daily lives and particularly in our struggle against oppression, exploitation and injustice.

The Ummah (this global community of Tauheed) must in all places, at all times, and under all circumstances, whether in adversity or prosperity, be vigilant about our unity, and especially about our unity in action.

'O ye who believe! Why say ye that which ye do not? Grievously odious is it in the sight of Allah that ye say that which ye do not. Truly Allah loves those who fight in His cause in battle array as if they were a solid cemented structure.'

[Qur'an 61:2-4]

'O ye who believe! When ye meet a

force, be firm, and call Allah in remembrance much (and often); that ye may prosper; and obey Allah and His Rasul; and fall into no disputes, lest ye lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and persevering; for Allah is with those who patiently persevere...'

[Qur'an 8:46]

If Muslims act in accordance with these principles, then they will never rise against one another and their energies, prestige and power will not be squandered.

To ignore these commands is to court disaster; and if Muslims actively fan and incite disputes, then they are guilty of a grave crime against the Ummah. This is tantamount to an act of treachery against the Ummah.

Causes of Disunity

'Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving clear signs: for them is a dreadful Penalty...'

[Qur'an 3:105]

One of the causes of disunity is, of course, ignorance about our obligation to strive for unity and to maintain unity. But as the above ayah clarifies, some believers cause disputes, dissension and therefore disunity after they have been informed of their duties.

Other major causes of disunity are: advocating and adhering to nationalism, propagating and practising racism and racialism; love of material goods; desiring praises and promotions from the oppressors; greed and selfishness; egoism and egotism; and inattentiveness to the basic law of cause and effect.

Hypocrisy is another major cause of dissension and disunity.

Consequences of Disunity

It is self-evident that the consequences of disunity are all detrimental to the Ummah in

general and to each Muslim in particular.

The Ummah becomes weak; suffers from low morale; wastes time and energy addressing minor problems, personality conflicts arise, factual problems are ignored and more attention is paid to attitudinal problems; and while all this is happening, the enemies of Islam are rejoicing.

We need to address the problem of disunity with great urgency but also with great care because it is going to be the basis of our entire argument in support of unity.

'O ye who believe! Fear Allah as He should be feared, and die not except in a state of Islam. And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out to you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace ye became brothers; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire; and He saved you from it; Thus does Allah make his signs clear to you; that ye may be guided.'

'Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain success.'

[Qur'an 3:102-104]

It is abundantly clear that 'a band of people inviting to all that is good' can only emerge from an Ummah that is united; they cannot emerge from a disunited Ummah. And this argument is sealed with the ayah which reads:

'And be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving Clear Signs: for them is a dreadful Penalty...'

[Qur'an 3:105]

Now this is exactly what we are doing at the moment! Because of this we cannot qualify as:

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'Ye are the best of Peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah.'

[Qur'an 3:110]

For to sow seeds of dissension; to cause splits; to cause division; and to encourage disunity is definitely **not forbidding what is wrong!**

Consequences of Islamic Unity

As Muslims move closer to unite, the less chance the superpowers have of dominating, oppressing, and exploiting us. Our morale will be high; liberation of the Muslims and the oppressed of the world will be attainable; victory over the superpowers will be possible; a new world social order can be propagated with confidence; and justice, peace and security will not merely be passed as resolutions but will become a reality, Insha'Allah!

THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

The Global Community of Knowledge

Islam begins with knowledge; Islam thrives on knowledge and knowledge thrives on Islam. Islamic governance is the governance of knowledge.

"Say: Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?"

[Qur'an 39:9]

"The learned must not hide his knowledge nor the ignorant his ignorance."

[Hadith]

Islam sets us the objective of a 100% literate community. Literate not only in the sense of being able to read, write and spell, but also being conceptually literate. Once a person is conceptually literate, behavioural changes can take place more efficiently. Within an Islamic community such a person will be functionally literate.

Many of our problems stem from conceptual and functional illiteracy. Illiteracy and ignorance in general, is a factual problem as well as an attitudinal problem.

The causes of dissension in the Ummah can be divided into these two distinct categories:

- 1) Factual problems
- 2) Attitudinal problems

Factual problems are resolved by putting the facts on the table; but attitudinal problems are not necessarily resolved by putting the facts on the table. Attitudinal problems

are only resolved by changing attitudes.

The Global Community of Compassion

'Muhammad is the Rasul of Allah; and those who are with him are strong against the Unbelievers (but) compassionate amongst each other.'

[Qur'an 48:29]

Why should Muslims take instructions from those who are only thinking in their own interests? And who are prepared to compromise the position of Muslims simply to attain to positions of power?

Because of the behaviour of some Muslims towards others one would think that they are supposed to be harsh and uncompromising with each other and compassionate and compromising with their enemies!

'A Muslim is he whose tongue and hands are not annoying to other Muslims.'

[Hadith]

'And those who annoy believing men and women undeservedly, bear (on themselves) a calumny and a glaring sin.'

[Qur'an 33:58]

Is it so difficult to establish cordial relations between Muslims?

The Global Community of Sharing

'And they feed for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan and the captive, (saying), we feed you for the sake of Allah alone; no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks.'

[Qur'an 76:8-9]

'By no means shall ye attain righteousness unless ye give (freely) of that which ye love, and whatever ye give, of a Truth Allah knoweth it well.'

[Qur'an 3:92]

In Islam, knowledge, skills, food, wealth and even our joys and sorrows are shared. And of course, the best example is that of the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar*. In this country we have so much that we can share with the less fortunate, the oppressed, the exploited and

the downtrodden. And all of this can be more effectively done if we are united and administer our resources from a central administration.

The Global Community of Self-Discipline

Self-discipline implies accountability and responsibility. Our self-discipline is evident in our adherence to dietary laws, ablutions, *salaah*, *zakaah*, fasting and *haji*. This self-discipline must also extend into our mutual relationships; as well as our communal and national relationships.

'Verily Allah will never change the condition of people unless they change it themselves (with their own souls).'

[Qur'an 13:11]

We can achieve this, but:

- We must be able to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad; We must be able to fulfil our responsibilities;
- We must be willing to fulfil our responsibilities;
- Human integrity (and obviously Islamic integrity) cannot be achieved if duties and obligations are avoided;

One's own wishes and personal interests must not take preference over duties.

The Global Community of Sacrifice

'Let those fight in the Cause of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter, to him who fights in the Cause of Allah, whether he is slain or gets victory, soon shall We give him a reward of great value.'

[Qur'an 4:74]

'Truly my prayer and service of sacrifice, my life and my death are (all) for Allah, the Cherisher of the worlds.'

[Qur'an 6:162]

Now surely those who are prepared to sacrifice their properties and their lives in the cause of Allah will not hesitate to sacrifice their privileges, prejudices and positions. And why should these things not be sacrificed in order to achieve the unity of the *Ummah*? There is no legitimate excuse for evading this question, just as there is no justification for perpetuating our disunity.

Why should Muslims take instructions from those who are only thinking in their own interests? And who are prepared to compromise the position of Muslims simply to attain to positions of power?

The Global Community of Action

O ye who believe! Why say ye that

which ye do not. Grievously odious is it in the sight of Allah that ye say that which ye do not. Truly Allah loves those who fight in His Cause in battle, as if they were a solid cemented structure.'

[Qur'an 61:1-4]

'Actions are judged according to intentions.'

[Hadith]

Good intentions are not good enough. Once we have made an intention, we must acquire the necessary skills to execute that intention, to bring that intention to fruition.

An intention to unite the Muslims must be followed up by acquiring the requisite skills, and preparing the groundwork for that unity.

'Man shall have nothing but what he strives for.'

[Qur'an 59:30]

Islam has no place for fellow-travellers or fairweather patriots.

Being Muslim means never being too busy, never too tired, and never disinterested to serve the cause of Islam. To serve the cause of Unity is to serve the cause of Islam.

The Global Community of Justice

'O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against the rich or poor. For Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.'

[Qur'an 4:135]

Causing disunity and perpetuating disunity amongst Muslims is an act of injustice against the Muslims. It is also an act of injus-

tice against the 40 million oppressed people in this country because the oppressed masses are looking towards the Muslims as exemplars in the quest for unity.

The Global Community of Excellence

'Thus have We made of you an Ummah justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Rasul a witness over yourselves.'

[Qur'an 2:143]

'Ye are the best of peoples (nations) evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah.'

[Qur'an 3:109]

In order to achieve **excellence of performance** one needs to:

- 1) be fit to perform;
- 2) establish correctness of performance.

Those who are the cause of disunity, disension, bickering, religious wrangling and division in the Muslim community are obviously not fit to perform. Especially not fit to execute the task of uniting the Muslims.

Correctness of performance can only be evaluated against the criteria of the Qur'an. It is the same for excellence of performance.

THE CREATOR IS ONE

'Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute: He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.'

[Qur'an 112:1-4]

'Allah! There is no God but He, - the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal.'

No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) Before or After or Behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory).'

[Qur'an 2:255]

'Allah is He, than Whom there is no other God; - Who knows (all things) both secret and open; He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.'

'Allah is He, than Whom there is no other God; - the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme: Glory to Allah! (High is He) above the partners they attribute to Him.'

'He is Allah, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms (or Colours). To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.'

'Whatever is in the heavens and the earth, doth declare His praises and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.'

[Qur'an 59:54]

Therefore His Creation Is One:

'Blessed is He Who sent down the Criterion to His Servant, that it may be an admonition to all creatures; - He to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: No son has He begotten, nor has He a partner in His dominion: It is He who created all



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things and ordered them in due proportions.’

[Qur’an 25:12]

Mankind Is Part of Creation, Therefore Mankind Is One:

“Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book of Truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed;...

[Qur’an 49:13]

Because Mankind Is One, The Universal Form of Guidance For Mankind Is One:

‘Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you; that ye worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah. If then they turn back, say ye: “Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah’s Will)’

[Qur’an 3:64]

‘O Mankind! The Rasul has come to you in Truth from Allah: Believe in him; it is best for you. But if ye reject Faith, to Allah belong all things in the heavens and on earth; and Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.’

[Qur’an 4:170]

‘O Mankind! Verily there hath come to you a convincing proof from your Lord: for we have sent unto you a light (that is) manifest.’

[Qur’an 4:174]

‘... the Command is for none but Allah; He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him; That is the right religion, but most men understand not...’

[Qur’an 12:40]

‘So set thy face steadily, and truly to the Faith: (Establish) Allah’s handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the Standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not.

‘Turn ye back in repentance to Him, and fear Him, establish regular prayers, and be ye not among those who join Gods with Allah, - those who split up their Religion, and become (mere) sects, - each party rejoicing in what is with itself!’

[Qur’an 30:31-32]

‘The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on

Noah - that which We have sent by inspiration to thee - and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no division therein....’

[Qur’an 42:13]

‘The Rasul believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of Faith. Each one (of them) believeth in Allah, His Angels, His Books and His Apostles. “We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of His Apostles”. And they say: “We hear, and we obey: (We seek) Thy forgiveness, Our Lord, and to Thee is the end of all journeys.”’

[Qur’an 2:285]

The unity of the Believers is based on a set of eternal principles which cannot be deviated from in any manner whatsoever

It is clear then that Allah is the Creator of everything in the Heavens and the Earth. Allah is the Creator of Mankind - and the Qur’an states in Surah Nisaa (i.e. Qur’an 4:1) that Allah created Man from ‘a single soul’. Mankind therefore has a single Creator and also common ancestry.

Mankind also has a common human nature - even if only in the sense of potentiality. Mankind was created as *Khalifatullah* (Qur’an 2:30-38). Guidance from Allah is therefore addressed to the whole of mankind. The charges therefore, of sectarianism and sectionalism are absurd to say the least.

Unity of Believers

The unity of the Believers is based on a set of eternal principles which cannot be deviated from in any manner whatsoever. These are:

Tauheed - Allah is One, His entire creation is one, and a universal set of laws governs the entire creation;

Nubuwwat (Prophethood) - individuals sent to mankind to teach them the set of universal laws governing the voluntary actions of mankind;

Ma’ad (Resurrection and Accountability on the Day of Resurrection) - if Allah created man in the first instance, then the same Creator will re-create man; and because man has personal responsibility, each individual is held accountable for his conscious, voluntary actions;

Adl (Justice) - the specific mission of All

Prophets was to establish just social orders based on Revelation. Justice of man to himself (i.e. to be true to his own human nature); Justice to his fellow human beings; Justice to the rest of creation. This principle is pivotal to the existence of the social order of the Believers.

Imamate (Leadership) - this leadership is based on meritocracy as specifically mentioned in Qur’an 2:124 and Qur’an 4:58-59.

If these principles are violated, then the unity of the Believers is not only endangered, but harmed, damaged and destroyed.

The Qur’an states with absolute clarity:

‘Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book of Truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book, after the clear signs came to them, did not differ among themselves, except through selfish contumacy. Allah, by His Grace, guided the believers to the truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For Allah guides whom He will to a path that is straight.’

[Qur’an 2:213]

‘The religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will); nor did the People of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account. So if they dispute with thee, Say: “I have submitted my whole self to Allah and so have those who follow me.”’

‘And say to the People of the Book and those who are unlearned: “Do ye (also) submit yourselves?” If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn back, thy duty is to convey the message; and in Allah’s sight are (all) His servants.’

[Qur’an 3:19-20]

‘Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that ye worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah.

‘If they turn back, say ye: “Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah’s Will).”’

[Qur’an 3:64]

‘O Mankind! The Rasul has come to you in truth from Allah: Believe in him, it is best for you. But if ye reject Faith, to Allah belong all things in the heavens and earth: and Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.’

[Qur’an 4:170]

‘O Mankind! Verily there hath come

to you a convincing proof from your Lord: For We have sent unto you a light (that is) manifest: then those who believe in Allah, and hold fast to Him, - soon will He admit them to Mercy and Grace from Himself and guide them to Himself by a Straight Way.'

[Qur'an 4:174-175]

'Follow (O Men!) the Revelation given unto you from your Lord, and follow not, as friends and protectors, other than Him. Little is it ye remember of admonition.'

[Qur'an 7:3]

'... the command is for none but Allah: He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him: That is the right religion, but most men understand not...'

[Qur'an 12:40]

'And we sent down to thee the book for the express purpose, that thou should make clear to them those things in which they differ, and that it should be a guide and a mercy to those who believe.'

[Qur'an 16:64]

'O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things)'

[Qur'an 49:13]

The Characteristics of Those Who Enter Into This Unity

'O ye who believe! Fear Allah as He should be feared, and die not except

in a state of Islam. And hold fast, all together by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided amongst yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts with love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth Allah make His Signs clear to you; that ye may be guided.

'Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity.

'Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving signs: for them is a dreadful Penalty.'

[Qur'an 3:102-105]

'Ye are the best of Peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah ...'

[Qur'an 3:110]

'O ye who believe! Persevere in patience and constancy; vie in such perseverance; strengthen each other; and fear Allah; that ye may prosper.'

[Qur'an 3:200]

'Whoever recommends and helps a good cause becomes a partner therein: and whoever recommends and helps an evil cause shares in its burden: and Allah hath power over all things.'

[Qur'an 4:85]

'As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell

them the truth of all that they did.'

[Qur'an 6:159]

'O ye who believe! Take not for protectors your fathers and your brothers if they love infidelity above faith: if any of you do so, they do wrong.

Say: 'If it be that your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your mates or your kindred; the wealth that ye have gained; The Commerce in which ye fear a decline; or the dwellings in which ye delight - are dearer to you than Allah and His Rasul, or the Striving for His Cause; then wait until Allah brings about His Decision; and Allah guides not the rebellious.'

[Qur'an 9:23-24]

'Fulfil the Covenant of Allah when ye have entered into it, and break not your oaths after ye have confirmed them; indeed ye have made Allah your surety, for Allah knoweth all that ye do.

'And be not like a woman who breaks into untwisted strands the yarn which she has spun, after it has become strong. Nor take your oaths to practice deception between yourselves, lest one party should be more numerous than another; for Allah will test you by this; and on the Day of Judgement He will certainly make clear to you (the truth of) that wherein ye disagree.'

[Qur'an 16:91-92]

Imam Achmad Cassiem

is a founder member of the anti-apartheid group Qibla, a member of the PAC, former Robben Island political prisoner and advisor to the Islamic Human Rights Commission. The full text of this essay and the rest of the essays in 'Quest for Unity' has been made free to download [here](#). You can buy a print [copy here](#).

Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit (CIK)

This project has produced documentation targeted at policy makers, lawmakers, academics and activists in order to tackle Islamophobia.

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Back to the Future: Revisiting Ideas of Islam, Women's Liberation and Equality

Arzu Merali looks back at her work on women's rights and asks whether the movements for justice, whether Muslim or not, have lost their way.

I decided one day I was a feminist. I think I was 12 years old. I was born and grew up in white working-class North London, and that combined with a thrice annual dose of South Asian heritage events, and weekly Saturday 'Islamic' classes, was enough to convince me that a woman's lot was not great, and something needed to be done. It was another five years before I found myself one day swapping a mini skirt and mega hair (it was the 1980s) for everything covered up, scarf included, not a strand of hair showing. The journey I went on was to mind then and now, one of a seamless resolution of the feminist dilemma. The dilemma of the 1980s, the particularities of North London / North Europe, the North, simply (very simply put) was how to be free of the objectification of women, the sexualisation of our existence as defined by men, the male gaze of culture enacted in law and absorbed into every fibre of the political, economic and cultural organisation of society.

It worked. Freedom.

Yet, less than 200 words into this essay, I can hear the screams, from men, women, secularists, Muslims, "You can't say that." Well, I have to respond, in all earnestness, "Why not?" Why is it that an Islamic solution to the immediate problems of an individual, and then maybe a society cannot be expressed. Don't agree with it if you don't want to, but why deny someone's claim to freedom if freedom is what we claim is the most important good of the societies we (want to) live in? We did and still do in our Northern mindsets, live in an age of ascendant liberalism, where freedom (more so than justice) is the goal of movements – national, sexual, you name it, we crave it. When it comes to defining or even just mooted the possibility of a way that could lead to just resolution of societal issues, it turns out that freedom does not actually apply. The much-hailed marketplace of ideas is not open to Muslims as practising Muslims. And with that, Muslim women like me, were not to be considered feminists.

Somewhere along the journey I describe above (and subsequently) I have written about various aspects of what at different

times have been subsumed as conversations about gender, sexuality, feminism, Islamic feminism, human rights, grammars of dignity. One of those papers, 'Other Voices in the Garden: Why Muslim Women Don't Have Human Rights', is one, written when I was pregnant with my daughter, that I find myself revisiting twenty something years later. Other papers have had discrete audiences: outward facing to hostile and friendly liberal / feminist / progressive audiences; Muslim facing in general; 'progressive' and 'critical' Muslim voices in particular and so on.

'Other Voices' however, written whilst young(ish) still and full of raging pregnancy hormones is one I want to revisit. It speaks (in still youngish naiveté) to various of those audiences, its central claim being that Muslim women can't have human rights simply for no other reason that the discourse of human rights itself excludes them. It is not Muslim conservatism or traditionalism or essentialism that prevents (Muslim) women from the free and unfettered enjoyment of the good life, but the intransigence of human rights speak (whether law, treaty, policy or now common sense norm) to infer agency and full humanity to Muslims per se and Muslims (and other non-European) women in particular.

The universal is in fact very parochial when it comes to this issue. That's what I argued then. I was hoping that by the time my daughter was a young woman we would be somewhere past the impasse of the 'Can Muslims / Islam be Modern / Enlightened / Compatible with Human Rights' narrative would have been breached. Yet, despite all sorts of movements meantime – critical race, Islamic and post-colonial feminism, the nascent decolonial movements in theory and praxes – we still seem to be stuck at this border. Insofar as this is an outward facing impasse – Muslims versus the Western / Northern non-Muslim – then this stand-off is less important, consequential even, than before. That West / North is in decline, lashing out in ever desperate cycles of brutality and violence (Afghanistan, Iraq, even Ukraine) to cling on to the remnants of its

empire(s). However, our internalisations of this debate is something more advanced, engineered and accomplished than two, three, four, five decades ago. And so I am looking to see what went wrong, where I went wrong, and where we can maybe, regroup.

23 years ago and counting

So, I proudly proclaimed, first at a talk at the University of Leicester and then as the paper 'Other Voices':

"But what does this contention actually mean? There are three perspectives that we can take to explain this. The first is the Western view of Islam as a civilisation as opposed to western civilisation. With this approach we can measure women's progress according to Western criteria, with particular reference to Huntington and women's progress to equality. The second view is the Western view of Islam as a culture in the 20th century as opposed to Western, capitalist, liberal culture. This involves the categorisation of political and secular Muslims. In this approach we can look at the anomalies of UN literature and statistics, as well as the statistics of human rights discourse. The third view requires critical thinking and interpretation, it is the challenge of comparing human rights against Islam as ethical discourses. For this we need to look at the genesis of critical thinking in the West, and question its basic assumptions – how free is it? – how equal? But we also need to look at our own history and our contemporary situation through a critical lens – have we ever delivered anything near a Qur'anic society?"

What now then of these three ways of seeing (with due deference to John Berger, whose analysis of ways of seeing has become more important to me as I age)? Well, the civilisational, Huntington et al, has risen and fallen and maybe rises anew but with different emphases. Samuel Huntington argued that the West and its values (of which human rights and Christianity were crowning secular and religious glories resulting in liberalism / liberal democracy) were not universal but unique – no-one else outside the Western (read white, Western European as American

(and begrudgingly the outliers of Australia and white South Africa)) world can develop to the level of this pinnacle of humanity. They may 'ape' it, argues Huntington, but it will never be real and true. At the meta level, there were responses from all sorts of movements, but two in particular then gave succour to an Islamic alternative: the 'reforming' movement of President Khatami of Iran and the rising Islamic political movement that culminated in the victory of the AK Party in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In short, we are as we are, you are right, and we have a right to be different. We do not have your ways of seeing and being, and we should be left alone to be.

This is of course simplistic, and any number of initiatives by both, including the now infamous Khatami CNN interview ('pilgrim fathers' anyone?) with Christiane Amanpour circa 1999, sought to actually make common cause between aspects of Western civilisation and Islamic civilisations of past and present.

And now?

The abrupt disruptions of everything from the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad that turned the Islamic political gaze back towards a Muslim-Muslim and Muslim-South aspect, to the no-conflict foreign policy of Turkey opened a possibility of alternative spaces (not necessarily civilisations) that saw the West as something to be dealt with but not a primary focus in the development of societal norms, progress and development. Muslims and the 'others' of the Huntington headspace, didn't need either validation or direction from a West in turmoil and decline. Huntington and his ilk were irrelevant.

Those were halcyon days. Then came Syria. I, and many better others, have written about and vehemently disagreed about this elsewhere. Suffice to say here that the West resurged through this conflict in ways that exposed that its ideas were so deeply embedded in the Muslim / other psyche, we were prepared to destroy each other to no-one's benefit except that of the old colonialists, their settler outpost and above all the US.

What does / did any of this mean for (Muslim) women? In the Huntington civilisational discourse, Muslim women, as part of that alternative 'hands off us', arguably had a space within which they could create, advocate and participate on their own terms. And those terms included Islamic imaginings of the good for women, for children, for families for society as a whole. Dare I say it, that space could have created the underpinnings for ummah-wide change. That is the

It is not enough for there to be more practising, hijab clad Muslim women or any type of Muslim women in places of power and prominence in a world, where every attempt to change it in a way that doesn't conform to narrow political understandings of the good is demonised, delegitimised and even criminalised

least that could have, should have, to some extent did happen. You can see the remnants of that in the world today. In 1999, newly elected Fazilat Party (a precursor to AKP) member of Parliament, Merve Kavakci, was booed by fellow politicians as she took her place in parliament. Why? She wore a hijab. So intense was the backlash that she was ejected from the chamber, and prevented from being sworn in. Today she is an ambassador for her country, as are many other be-hijabed women from Iran and elsewhere around the world. More power to them all. We are proud.

But that takes us to the second aspect of where things have gone wrong, and where even our successes fail us.

More representation, same system.

There was always a positivist get out clause when it came to feminism. Here are the markers of equality (the UN has had conferences to keep setting them endlessly, the appendices of 'Other Voices' looked at the 1995 Beijing conference literature) – you meet them, we will accept you into the club of the progressive. Except it was never as simple as that. If it had been so, then back in Beijing in 1995, and today in the multi-representational diplomatic lists world-wide, so many of the world's countries would be included who simply aren't. Positivism isn't as scientific or objective as it claims. It has never really been just a numbers game. If it had been like that in Beijing the Iranian delegation would not have been endlessly hassled, and they themselves would not have been so bemused as to why they were harranged. On healthcare provision for women, numbers of women in education, in academia, as chancellors of universities and so forth, even on issues like maternity pay, they were ahead of the US and the UK. Those markers have only since improved more in Iran, and yet we hear the scream again and again that Iran oppresses women – nay it is one of the worst oppressors of women world-wide. At best this narrative is cynical and at worst it is deeply ideological, and that ideology clearly sees women as something to be instrumentalised not liberated.

It is not enough for there to be more practising, hijab clad Muslim women or any type of Muslim women in places of power and prominence in a world, where every attempt to change it in a way that doesn't conform to narrow political understandings of the good is demonised, delegitimised and even criminalised.

Ways of Seeing Liberation

Lila Abu Lughod explains this perfectly in her seminal essay, ['Do Muslim Women](#)

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Need Saving? Decrying e.g. the Taliban (at the time of writing its first iteration) without taking into account what Muslim women who (a) (happily) wore the burqa, (b) supported the Taliban, believed and felt, simply denied them agency, similar to what the Taliban were accused of doing. If, as many ethnographic and anthropological studies found, many women adopted the burqa (as quoted in Lughod) to navigate the sexist and often sexually harassing society they lived in, to the extent that this was in their own opinion, a way of immediate liberation for them, then how can this be ignored or discounted. Yes, we can argue that the burden of breaking the sexual aggression of wider society should not be on women. However, waiting around for men to effectively reverse their gaze isn't such an appealing option.

That 'male gaze' expounded by Laura Mulvey but meticulously detailed by John Berger in his TV series and book of the 1970s 'Ways of Seeing', is one that hasn't gone away. Art, literature, popular culture all portray women as sexualised subjects, to be consumed by a male consumer - the viewer. It doesn't matter that in the literal marketplace women are also consumers, that in the cultural realm they are also viewers. Both these activities for them remain passive, they buy into their subjugation (hence the aggressive fashion and cosmetics industries of yesteryear and today, the selfie and surgery culture of now and the foreseeable future). Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria, [elsewhere on these pages](#) looks at how sex and sexualisation of women still reigns today. Whilst US First Ladies may proclaim that wars have been fought to liberate Muslim women, it is in fact the market of the male gaze that arrives with the US army and or economy. As the Soviet Union collapsed (and with it, life expectancies in general and support and opportunities for women in particular), Germaine Greer notes that before a Soviet woman could see a banana in her grocery store, she was able to find Dior lipsticks¹. Worse still Greer charts her own journey as leading feminist - or perhaps women's liberationist is a better term - to find the 'Whole Woman':

"In *The Female Eunuch* I argued that every girl child is conceived as a whole woman, from the time of her birth to her death she is progressively disabled. A woman's duty to herself is to survive this process, then to recognise it, then to take measures to defend herself against it. For years after... I travelled the earth to see if I could glimpse a surviving whole woman. She would be a woman who did not exist to embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon a man to endow her with identity and social status... I gazed at women in segregated societies and found them in many ways stronger than women who would not go into a theatre or a restaurant without a man. I learnt the limitlessness of women's work from labourers, beggerwomen, tribeswomen. I learnt about sexual pleasure from women who had been infibulated...

"No sooner had I caught sight of the whole woman than western marketing came

blaring down upon her with its vast panoply of spectacular effects, strutting and trumpeting the highly seductive gospel of salvation... My strong women thrust their muscular feet into high heels and learned to totter; ... and instead of mothers' milk fed commercial formulae made up with dirty water to their chil-

In order to get to a world where we can move beyond the tyranny of the 'female stereotype' (on display in some parts of the world, undercover of 'modest' garments in other parts) I argue that Muslim societies do have the right to mandate dress norms as the way of getting there, or even just as a meantime event to help us get there

dren; they spent their tiny store of cash on lipstick and nail varnish, and were made modern. Even the hard-working women of China began curling their hair to prove that they too were real (i.e. phony) women. While western feminists were valiantly contending for a key to the executive washroom, the feminine stereotype was completing her conquest of the world."

It is hard to see how any of this does not apply now. Except now, the *fait accompli* is so vast that in minoritized settings, we aren't say that maybe there is an Islamic alternative. We aren't even suggest, as Abu Lughod does, that maybe we should look at why after the Islamic Revolution in Iran there have been 'great increases in literacy, decreases in birth rates, presence of women in the professions and government, and a feminist flourishing in fields like writing and film-making...'. Could it be down to, well to put it bluntly, the effect of mandatory hijab?

There, I said it.

It's not that we aren't even say it anymore, it's that we too believe we shouldn't believe it. Because it involves mandating dress, as if dress isn't mandated everywhere else, just differently, but usually with male / female difference.

Elsewhere, I have asked feminists particularly of the standpoint and post-colonial variety to accept that there can exist both a universalising Muslim female view of the good for women and society, and a way that such views can exist within a multitude of ideas of imagining and developing the greater good. One of those ideas might be what we understand to be human rights as per the last less than one hundred years of developing the term. It can also and crucially equally, be the 1400- year understanding of dignity, rights, equity and justice that Muslims (women and men both, and yes that was

deliberate) aspire to and argue over. Above all, I have a right to choose the latter and believe it is better. At this point we may begin to be able to have a conversation about women, rights and justice.

As it happens, I don't actually believe that mandating women to wear some form of hijab is a be all cure to the ills of the Westernised world we all live in to a greater or lesser extent. I also don't believe women whether Muslim or not all deciding to wear more clothing, modest clothing or what we might describe as 'hijab' is a cure all either (additionally, I don't believe this is even a primary aim of hijab in itself). To fix the gender inequity and injustice we face in the world today requires many more revolutions: of how men think; of how women understand the processes which deny them dignity work as the norms of societies that claim to value gender equality. In order to get to a world where we can move beyond the tyranny of the 'female stereotype' (on display in some parts of the world, undercover of 'modest' garments in other parts) I argue that Muslim societies do have the right to mandate dress norms as the way of getting there, or even just as a meantime event to help us get there. In any event, they have the right to mandate thus, because, well everyone else does, just not, as we can see so well, with such good intentions. Just because we do not decry it the way we decry it elsewhere, does not mean that the tyranny of Western dress mandates - by law and culture - don't exist.

Back in 1999, I challenged a Muslim audience to take a moment away from the very proper critique of how oppressive Westernised society actually is, of how poor its track record on women's rights really is (in addition to the effects of the male gaze, remember the Married Women's Property Act of 1888 allowing women to own property in England, a right conferred by Islam at the outset of the Prophetic mission?) How far have we come to actually realising a Quranic society, which we claim is the epitome of liberation here on earth? It cannot be right that decades later, to even ask this question is anathema not to those who oppose the Quran, but to those who believe in it.

Adding (Muslim) women to the pot and stirring is not enough. Decolonising our thinking and delinking it from ideas about women's 'progress' in the West, is not enough. Having alternatives that do not rely on either of the foregoing is not enough either, but it is a (re)start. Beginning again on this road is a benefit not just for Muslims, and Muslim women, but all marginalised people. Oh, and by the way, I am not a feminist.

Arzu Merali

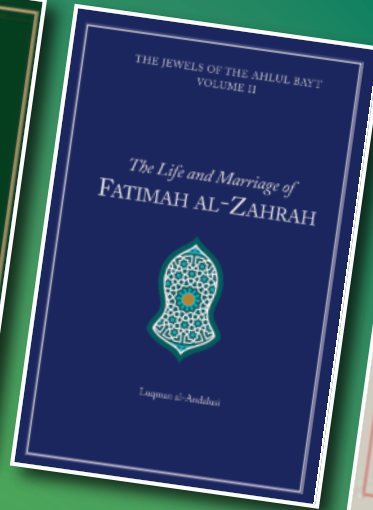
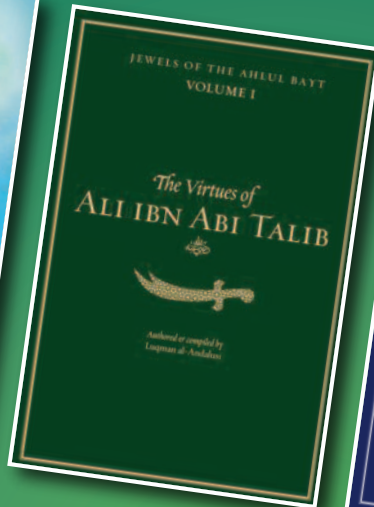
is a writer and researcher based in London, UK. She is one of the editors of *The Long View* and was a founder of Islamic Human Rights Commission. Follow her on Twitter @arzumerali.

¹ The Whole Woman, Germaine Greer, 1999



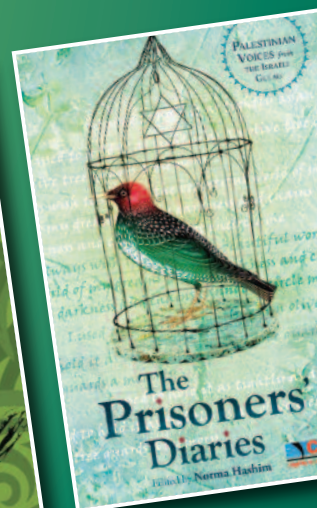
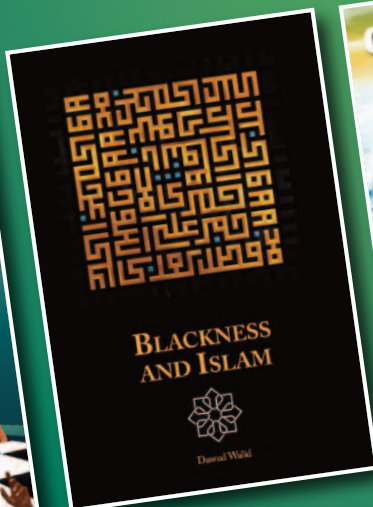
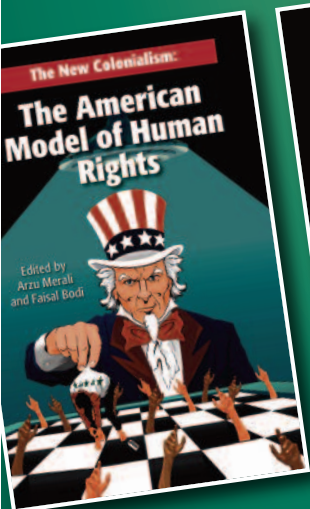
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