A Rumor of Anger: Understanding Muslims' Voices in the Context of "Pure War"

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand "Muslims' voices" at the advent of the twenty-first century, especially the angry tone within. I would argue that such anger could be construed by situating the voices in the context of "pure war" constituted by terrorism used by different groups in the name of Islam, as well as state violence used in the name of security and order at the expense of rights and democracy. When the state exercises more control over its population through modern technology, which renders private space almost obsolete, rumors are used to offset its powerful gaze. Rumors about violence in the context of pure war, in turn, engender among Muslims some kinds of negative group cohesion that is fertile ground for anger directed against "the others," as evidenced in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Introduction

Before Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, with Islam playing the pivotal role, captured the global imagination of academics and policymakers in 1993, there was Bernard Lewis' seminal essay on "The Roots of Muslim Rage," in *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990). In his later work (an expansion of the essay), he pointed out that things had indeed gone badly wrong in the lands of Islam. Muslims have become poor, weak, and ignorant. And in his analysis, it was how the questions are raised about these "wrongs" that would, by and large, determine the Muslim world's future: "Who did this to us?" and "What did we do wrong?"

It is interesting to note, however, that these two questions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, both questions will lead us through the complex road

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of the politics of Muslims' identity, where the notions of "self" and "others" will need to be underscored. Then, the path already taken will have to be reexamined to find out what went wrong. For some, it will lead to a choice between a return to "authentic Islam" or a move toward "secular society."[1] While searching for the "roots" of a public sentiment as well as the idea of "Muslim" as a monolithic entity are highly problematic, Lewis did address a most important political element: rage.

There are many ways to discuss the issues of Muslims' voices in today's world. I choose anger for two reasons. First, though often described merely as a wild emotion that disrupts social order as well as political dialogue, anger, as a political emotion, is indispensable because it could serve as the voice of the powerless questioning the dominant order. Order itself, some would argue, is rooted in the anger of middle-class professionals, whose claim to social status and power depends on their moralistic enforcement of the rule of technique justified by technical rationality.[2] Second, anger that exists in a context heightened by deadly conflicts could strongly reflect the relationship between self and others. Although each case differs, there have been signs in the past two years from Spain to England and from France to the Philippines, as well as in southern Thailand, that deadly conflicts involving Muslims have become more visible. In such contexts, anger proliferates.

In this paper, I argue that Muslims' anger, understood as voices influencing the future course of the world, could be better construed by raising three related questions: In what way is the present global context conducive to the rise of anger among Muslims? How does anger spread in such a context? And, finally, what does anger do to Muslim societies?

"The New Pure War" as an Anger-Producing Context

There have been 228 armed conflicts since World War II ended, and 118 since the cold war ended. Most of these have been fought within states. In 2004, in twenty-two locations around the world, there were thirty ongoing armed conflicts, defined as contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both, where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least twenty-five battle-related deaths per year and at least one party is the national government.[3]

But at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the face of war and violence has become more complicated. The context of global violence characterized by global terrorism, in itself perhaps a response to conditions of glaring injustice, and the state's violent responses have produced some unusual realities in political societies. First, since terrorism can attack anyone

at any time or place, it successfully robs a society of that precious sense of certainty that allows its members to continue their lives in a condition of normality. In this sense, both the present terror and the continuing war against it undermine the basic foundation of any political society, namely, a sense of certainty guaranteed by the state's normal functioning, the minimum of which is to protect its citizens' lives. Second, in the absence of normality fueled by fear and anger, the society that mourns the tragic fate of its victims is transformed into a society of victimizers.[4] The present violent conditions, I would argue, have turned the world into a state of pure war.

Two decades ago, theorist Paul Virilo suggested that the modern text of international danger is scripted by logistical experts in "the age of logistics," where all seemingly non-military social processes are "vectorized" in preparation for war.[5] Such logistical thinking preoccupies itself with avoiding full-scale global nuclear catastrophe, which allows other armed hostilities to continue as "interstate delinquencies" or "state terrorism." Thus, he argues that the modern politics of preoccupation with nuclear extermination amounts to a depoliticization of all other violent confrontations.[6]

But the present pure war, based on the threats of terrorism and counter-threats of state terrorism, is somewhat different. It is pure war in the sense that the whole society is mobilized militarily at all times in the name of fear. In the United States right now, there is a daily television notification of different-colored terrorist threat levels – not unlike weather announcements. Yet the continuing violence, such as the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or violence in southern Thailand, as well as the cultural violence that appears in the form of profiling a group of people as potential terrorists, as seen in the media, is not hidden. Instead, every armed hostility as well as all conflicts between governments and those who oppose them can be conveniently seen as figments in the war against terror imagination.

Depoliticization in this new pure war takes place not because conflicts and violent confrontations have been eclipsed by any grand catastrophe, but because they have been militarized and their discourse heavily securitized. Under such circumstances, political solutions are undermined (if not altogether absent), ordinary citizens' rights are sacrificed, and civil society groups that oppose the state are punished or silenced – at times summarily. The time when a political society has to live under the shadow of such pure war is the moment when anger can be produced quite easily.

Imagine the following scenario:

- Video cameras mounted on street corners and covert photography conducted from behind special slits cut into delivery vans or from the roofs

of buildings, or from helicopters in the sky covering political demonstrations and funerals.

- The visual appearance and dress of many residents in communities are registered and cross-referenced in extensive computer files accessed by police, army patrols, and their respective roadblocks.
- An informant (male, 32) who lived under the gaze of army video camera declared: "They know the patterns of your wallpaper and the color of your underwear!"
- Young males fourteen and older, the group most frequently stopped and searched on the street, have been known to return home and shower after being body-frisked in public by the security forces.

These scenarios could very well occur in Mindanao, southern Philippines. Those whose attire were profiled and bodies frisked by the soldiers could be young Muslims in southern Thailand. But actually, they were from Northern Ireland's County Tyrone (1978-80) and Belfast (1984-87; 1990-92). The appearance and attire of the residents in question were Catholic working class, as were the young Catholic males who felt so dirty that they had to return home to shower after being frisked by the soldiers.[7]

In the context of the new pure war, state authorities can ignore civil rights and cultural sensitivities in the name of preserving national security. At times, such activities are legitimized by specific laws designed to authorize the exercise of special power. Encountering Malay Muslims in southern Thailand, Thai soldiers, who are sent in from other regions and are rarely Muslim, often do not understand just how important cleanliness is to the poor villagers. For example, before 4 January 2004, the day when militants attacked the military camp in Narathiwat and stole more than 400 weapons, soldiers came to search Bagong Pitaya School in Nong Chik Pattani, southern Thailand, for weapons. From 9:00 am to 11:00 am, they used police dogs to search for suspects and illegal objects in the school. These dogs, wet with water, went everywhere. Baba Sa, the school's leader, said later:

> We lost our hearts. How could they do such a thing? Why did they trample on our dignity as Muslims? We were sad and angry. We thought, "They didn't trust us at all?" I tried my very best to be patient, but I couldn't help thinking this way. It has never happened. We don't despise the dogs, but we have to do what we were taught.[8]

In this case, everyone in the school had to clean the whole place seven times, including once using rare earth mixed with water, as required by the

Islamic injunction of cleaning after being contaminated by some kinds of *najis* (unclean things), such as dogs' saliva.

When the soldiers enter Malay Muslims' houses with their shoes on, which has happened time and again, anger rises because their houses are not merely a place to stay but also a sacred space for prayers. Therefore, they have to be sufficiently clean for just such a purpose. The soldiers not only step on the sacred space secured for daily praying, but also on the inhabitants' identity by showing no regard for their dignity as Muslims.[9] This is, perhaps, how anger could be produced in the context of the new pure war. How, then, could such anger be vented among Muslims facing this situation?

Rumors as Muslims' Evading Instruments

As is now common knowledge, violence in southern Thailand has intensified over the past two years, beginning with the 4 January 2004 attack on a military camp in Narathiwat, where four Thai Buddhist soldiers were killed and more than 400 firearms were stolen. For the past two years, from 4 January 2004 to 4 January 2006, there have been 2,676 casualties among civilians, government officials, and militants from violence in southern Thailand. Among these, 1,076 lost their lives.[10]

The government has tried different means to control this violence. In the opinion of some high-ranking military officers, this violence points to the weakening, if not the absence, of state power. Therefore, the military has to reestablish state power in this area and try to make its presence felt. One way of doing this is to strengthen its gazing power over the population. Songkhla's governor reported that the province has just received a special budget for 900 closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) to record people's movement in public space to monitor potential acts of terror by phantom militants.[11]

Again, this is quite common in the context of the new pure war. For example, after two deadly Irish Republican Army bombings in London at the turn of the last decade, the British government set up so many CCTVs that an average Briton is scrutinized by some 300 cameras every day. Almost everyone is being observed in his/her daily life from getting on a bus to lining up at the bank and even driving around in London. While human rights advocates decry such a phenomenon, which has turned Britain into "the surveillance capital possibly of the world, certainly of Europe," not unlike the Orwellian Big Brother, others hail these cameras in the sky as "a kindly and watchful uncle or aunt."[12]

Within a circuit of "visual prosthetics" composed of surveillance cameras, helicopters flying over villages at night, the panoptic architecture of the inter-

rogation room at police stations, prisons in army camps, and aimed guns, political subjects are formed. These instruments of fatal vision can be divided into hardware and software technologies. The human gaze, subject to a high degree of spatial and temporal extension and electronic supplementation, must be placed among the latter. Due to its potential for violence, visual appropriation has become "a metonym for the dominance over others," for "power lies in the totalizing, engorged gaze over the politically prone body, and subjugation is encoded as exposure to this penetration."[13] How, then, can those subjugated by these "visual prosthetics" voice their resentment?

In late 2004, I was traveling alone in the three southern provinces speaking with local Muslims and Buddhists to get a feeling of how they lived under the recent violence. While having tea with some locals in a teashop in downtown Pattani one early afternoon, a man rushed inside and screamed in Malay. After listening carefully, it turned out that he was sharing a story of what had just happened "on the other side of town" when a young man was stopped by two local policemen: Failing to answer the policemen's questions satisfactorily, the youth was hit and his motorcycle was pushed down. The man's story immediately induced agreement from the audience. The fact that no one seemed to question its truth needs to be construed. Clearly, they must have heard something like this before, and so this only provided further evidence of how the authorities have always abused the locals.

Perhaps rumors, like the historical narratives outlined in Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* and *The Content of the Form*, or Roland Barthes' *Historical Discourse*, do have plots. These plots are not there to be discovered, but are for the participants who share the rumors to invent them. Rumors, therefore, are equally a fiction with imagined words and contents on the one hand, and events that are discovered on the other. A successful rumor is a story told in such a way that it fits a certain plot. Moreover, participants in a rumor – even listeners – are involved in the process of *emplotment* (White's term) when they impose a certain kind of order on seemingly confused or unrelated phenomena. *Emplotment* gives meaning to a set of events that take place chronologically and turns them into a related whole, at times with enough power to engender political change.[14] Once it assumes the character of a story, the rumor is ready to be told and retold.

Analyzing why rumors have become prevalent in the context of violence in Northern Ireland, Allen Feldman suggests that it is a form of resistance used by the locals to confront the cohabitation of the state and private life. There is a frisson here between the precision of the state's optics – the rationalization of political subjects by visual grids and archives – and rumor's imprecise, out-of-focus, and floating quality. Rumor, therefore, becomes a

vehicle for evading the rationalization of existence under state surveillance: "It is the very imprecision of rumor that drives it as a counternarrative against the electronic grid of the state's gaze."[15]

With imprecision as its major characteristic, rumor opens up possibilities for anyone involved, such that new episodes can be added and a modified story can instantly become another rumor and then travel with the speed of sound to all corners of the land. Once there, they can perform almost the exact function of replenishing the plot of how the Thai authorities have brutalized local Muslims. The question, then, is what does the spread of anger through rumors do to the Muslim societies of southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, or elsewhere in Europe in the context of pure war?

Anger and *Hyper-`asabiyah* in Muslim Societies

It is important to point out that anger, as a human emotion, is highly problematic and is regarded differently in different societies. For example, the Utku Eskimos of northern Canada consider anger as always inappropriate, since it is a sign of immaturity that makes its possessor appear infantile. On the other hand, Seneca's *On Anger* is full of stories of trivial provocations that arouse murderous responses. For the Romans, a truly manly man is extremely attached to his honor and therefore eager to get angry at any slight or damage. For both the Greeks and the Romans, anger is considered a pleasant emotion directed at the future, because of the pleasure of contemplating revenge.[16] But for the Muslims, anger is discouraged and those who restrain it are those who do good and therefore are loved by God:

> Hurry toward your Lord's forgiveness and a Garden as wide as the heavens and Earth prepared for the righteous, who give, both in prosperity and adversity, who restrain their anger and pardon people – God loves those who do good… (Qur'an, 3:133-34)[17]

But in the context of pure war and the ensuing rumors discussed above, one can argue that anger is prevalent among Muslims. Some would say that anger is needed to generate group feelings against objects of anger. Yet there are grounds for concern that anger might adversely affect Muslim societies.

In 1377, Ibn Khaldun wrote *Al-Muqaddimah*, his classic study on the general problems encountered in the philosophy of history and sociology. He pointed out that conditions affecting the nature of civilizations include savagery, sociability, and how one group achieves superiority over another and constructs group feelings.[18] This "group feeling" (*`asabiyah*) is at the core of

his understanding of society. For him, "only tribes held together by group feeling can live in the desert," because:

> [T]heir defence and protection are successful only if they are a closely knit group of common descent … since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else). Compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men.[19]

Using Ibn Khaldun's *`asabiyah* as the cornerstone of his analysis, Akbar S. Ahmad argues that during the twentieth century, the Muslim world suffered a breakdown of *`asabiyah* as a direct result of dramatic change. Two sets of conditions gave rise to this development: massive urbanization and demographic change due to a population explosion, as well as migration to the West, the increasing gap between rich and poor, widespread corruption, the low premium given to education, the identity crisis, and new seductive ideas that challenge traditional values. These conditions occured on a ground pregnant with past violence that has killed and displaced millions, split communities, and shattered families: the creation of Pakistan, the fight for/against Palestine/Israel, the revolution in Iran, civil wars in Algeria, and wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Central Asia. Sociopolitical decay that grows on the soil of cruel pasts and violent presents gives rise to a dangerous form of *`asabiyah*: *hyper-`asabiyah*. Ahmad concludes:

> With the collapse of *asabiyya* and the creation of *hyper-asabiyya*, neither *adl* (justice) nor *ihsan* (righteousness) is easy to attain, while society finds its expression through *fitna* (chaos) and *shar* (conflict).[20]

In other words, Muslims in societies facing these problems are angry, and it seems that Lewis might be right if the question often raised is "Who did this to us?" With an exaggerated feeling of group cohesion fostered by the present decay and past violence, anger is turned outward and group feeling is heightened. At a meeting of people seeking peaceful ways to end violence in southern Thailand, no local Muslim leaders appeared with their non-Muslim colleagues at a press conference to condemn the killing of an elderly Buddhist monk and two young temple boys inside a Buddhist temple in Pattani on 16 October 2005. When asked why they felt too uncomfortable to do so, they replied that there was not enough information about who was guilty. When I suggested that the condemnation was against the act itself, since it is wrong from a common ethical position and Islamic belief, I was met with silence, unlike what happens when the victims are Muslim. This is, perhaps,

a clear symptom of the rise of Ahmed's *hyper-`asabiyah*, which makes Muslims see primarily the sufferings of their own kind.

Conclusion: A Rumor of Anger as Reclaiming Compassion

In his *A Rumor of Angels*, Peter Berger points out that angels, those beings of light who witness the fullness of divine glory and appear as "signalizing" God's transcendence as well as His presence in the world, have become "rumors" and that we live in a situation where transcendence has been reduced to "rumors."[21] In this sense, rumor appears as a sign that the story shared as rumor has all but faded into oblivion. However, as discussed above, rumor could also be understood as a form of potent resistance against the increasing penetration of state power into private spheres. On the one hand, rumor signifies weakness waiting to disappear; on the other, it is a sign of strength when it becomes a weapon of choice for those who see the power of storytelling. Perhaps this is not the case of a rumor of anger as either a faint sign or a powerful expression. It could be both.

It is also important to point out that anger is an emotion. But it need not be construed merely as senseless. Martha Nussbaum, for example, maintains that emotions in general could be understood as judgments of value.[22] In such a case, anger involves judgments about important things at a moment when incompleteness is acknowledged before parts of the world beyond one's control. Taken together, a rumor of Muslims' anger could be seen as a way in which voices of resistance as a potent power, crucial for moral judgments, are expressed. To strengthen the moral quality of anger among Muslims is to underscore the need to voice anger when non-Muslims become victims of violence and injustice, realizing that it is in line with the inclusivistic Islamic message that Islam, as stated in Qur'an 3:96, exists to benefit humanity.

Endnotes

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