



THE NEW YORKER

COMMENT

DAYS OF RAGE

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OCTOBER 1, 2012

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In “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” an essay published in 1990, the historian Bernard Lewis describes a “surge of hatred” rising from the Islamic world that “becomes a rejection of Western civilization as such.” The thesis became influential. It posited a crisis within a global Islamic community that made conflict with the United States and Europe inevitable. Academics and policymakers expanded on these ideas after September 11th, which brought urgently to the fore questions about how Al Qaeda’s radical ideas should be understood in relation to wider, diverse Muslim thought. (Lewis wrote an essay on the subject for this magazine in the autumn of 2001.) George W. Bush adopted some of the discourse in crafting his Global War on Terrorism. “They hate our freedoms,” the President said.

But the notion that a generalized Muslim anger about Western ideas could explain violence or politics from Indonesia to Bangladesh, from Iran to Senegal, seemed deficient. It was like arguing that authoritarian strains in Christianity could explain apartheid, Argentine juntas, and the rise of Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, the meme sold, and it still sells. Last week, *Newsweek’s* cover splashed “Muslim Rage” in large type above a photograph of shouting men. Inside came advice on how to survive “Islamic hate.” Cable news channels—Fox and MSNBC alike—showed similar images, hour after hour. By now, many Americans must find nothing remarkable about the conflation of Muslim faith and contorted faces.

A short film on YouTube, called “Innocence of Muslims,” is the cause of the latest outbreak of violence. An Egyptian Coptic Christian on probation in California for bank fraud is apparently behind the movie. It is offensive both to followers of Islam and to cinephiles: the dialogue is laced with sectarian slander, and the low-budget aesthetic recalls “Santa Claus Conquers the Martians.” The film came out in June, but took weeks to reach extremists in North Africa. In Libya, on September 11th, attackers armed with rocket-propelled grenades carried out a strike that may have been planned; the American Ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens, died. He was the first Ambassador to be killed while on duty since 1979. Attackers struck the American Embassy in Cairo, and demonstrators looted an American school in Tunis.

Crowds have protested since then in several capitals, at times violently. Some of the protests appear to have been organized by fringe political parties and radical activists; for them, “Death to America” is a mobilizing strategy. The rioting they encourage is about Muslim rage only in a tautological sense: raging Muslims do the burning and looting, but they do not typically attract even a large minority of the local faithful. The faces on American screens are often shock troops, comparable to Europe’s skinheads or anarchists.

Stevens’s killers apparently belonged to a Salafi or jihadi network that the fragile, newly democratic Libyan government had failed to disarm. Salafis preach a return to seventh-century life styles, and their street gangs have proved menacing since the arrival of the Arab Spring. The Salafis have room to roam now, because some of the North African dictators who used to jail and torture them are gone. Yet they are not popular: on Friday in Benghazi, thousands of Libyans sacked the offices of Ansar al-Sharia, a jihadi militia accused of participating in the attack on Stevens. In Egypt, the Salafis have won a disturbing number of votes, but they are constrained by competition from the Muslim Brotherhood. Because the Brotherhood has moved from opposition to power, while the Salafis remain on the outside, it is in their interest to create unrest that forces the Brotherhood to act like the secular oppressors before them.

During these recent days of hate speech, there have been laments about the failure of Arab liberals and Arab youth—who stood so firmly against authoritarians in Tunisia and Egypt—to stand now against the radicals. But the essential problem of the Arab liberals has been disorganization, not timidity. It should also be noted that international liberalism tends to get weak knees when it must confront Islamist radicals who are ready to kill and be killed. Salman Rushdie, in his new memoir, “Joseph Anton,”

describes chillingly how, after Ayatollah Khomeini issued the fatwa calling for his death, in 1989—in response to his novel “The Satanic Verses”—some American and British publishers and writers backed away from him, as if he had brought the fatwa upon himself. There is no honor in relativism when radicals of any faith exploit religion to justify murder.

Revolutions sometimes consume their pluralists and their democrats. In the gathering Arab Autumn, the possibility of religious dictatorship in Egypt can hardly be dismissed, and Syria’s descent into civil war is a humanitarian and geopolitical crisis. Iran’s meddling has exacerbated sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, and its nuclear ambitions may upend the region’s military balance. But here, too, the familiar pessimism about Arab politics should be weighed against other evidence. A human-rights activist now leads Tunisia; the elections there and in Libya produced balanced parliaments, and democratic constitutions are being conceived for the first time.

Americans are also inclined to see the Middle East as a region in perpetual turmoil. But, except for two American-led invasions (to liberate Kuwait, in 1991, and to overthrow Saddam Hussein, in 2003), there has not been a major armed conflict between states in the Arab world since the end of the Cold War. (The thirty-four-day war between Israel and Hezbollah, in 2006, came close.) The price of stability in Arab countries has often been iron-fisted rule and brutality of the sort on display today in the streets of Bahrain and Syria, but the region’s traditions of tribal subsidies and balancing have also contributed to surprisingly durable, if anachronistic, monarchies, from Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Morocco.

As for the idea that Islam itself should be understood as an inevitable font of conflict, most of the world’s Muslims live in relatively peaceful Asia. Al Qaeda has all but disappeared east of Burma; it is hard to find much rage in the air-conditioned shopping malls of Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur. As mobile South Asian and Southeast Asian middle classes grow, so do the numbers of English-speaking Muslims seeking to construct modern and hybrid identities that don’t conform to the West’s narrower conceptions.

The uproar over “Innocence of Muslims” matters not because of the deep pathologies it has supposedly laid bare but because of the way the film went viral. A sectarian auteur with modest means used the Web to provoke enemies directly. The filmmakers employed the same strategies that liberal bloggers and Facebook users seized upon during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and that Syrian revolutionaries use daily to rally resistance to the butchering government in Damascus. Free speech in a digital public square—not fringe violence—is what’s new under the Mediterranean sun. And with free speech comes provocation. Last week, *Newsweek* launched a Twitter hash tag, #MuslimRage, to spur chatter about its cover story. What followed may constitute the most inspiring revolt yet of new media against old. Scores of English-speaking Muslim Twitter users, offended by the magazine’s clichéd imagery, hijacked (“pun intended,” one wrote) the online forum to post jokes about Muslim rage in the real world. One lamented a shortage of “Sharia Garcia” ice cream. A woman in a head scarf wrote, “I’m having such a good hair day. No one even knows.” Another, much re-tweeted entry read, “Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can’t yell for him.” We await an explication of the roots of Muslim irony. ♦

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