

Citizens of Faith and the Defense of State, by Safiyyah Ally

Though the characterization of Muslims in *Britz* is not always accurate, the series does raise several interesting questions. Two will be explored here: How can extremist elements within the Muslim community be dissuaded from engaging in terrorism, and what roles do individuals and leaders in the Muslim and non-Muslim community play in this regard?

To begin, one might point to the difficulty distinguishing would-be terrorists from other Muslims. Individuals with terrorist tendencies do not 'out' themselves; they often plan in secrecy, recruiting only those who appear receptive to their ideology. Some of their beliefs, of course, stem from an interpretative strand of Islam that is atomistic, text-based and literalistic by nature. Those who subscribe to this worldview tend to believe that one must live one's life in a manner that is consistent with the earliest Muslim generations. They rail against the Western world for its moral deficiencies, and they establish a clear demarcation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Some continue to conceive of the world as a division between *dar al-islam* (territory of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (territory of war), the latter of which is to eventually surrender to the conquering force of Islam. Repugnant though this worldview may be, its adherents are not necessarily militaristic or violent; regular mosque-goers who hold these beliefs about the world might never think to commit terror against others.

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But terrorists also proffer arguments rooted in the modern Western tradition, and in this sense, they share characteristics with other citizens engaged in struggles against various structures of power for falling short of standards of fairness and justice. Even as these terrorists themselves show little appreciation for notions of freedom and democracy, they speak out against the hypocrisy of the Western world for promoting and then abandoning its values at will. They point to the manner in which various parts of the Muslim *ummah* (community) are oppressed and humiliated by Western powers. Interestingly enough, Sohail's sister Nasima does not employ religious justifications for her actions; instead, she appears motivated by arguments shared by the secular activists with whom she works. Regardless, bold talk does not always imply bold action. Unless one observes another constructing a bomb, there is no certainty that an individual who adheres to this method of argument will take the extra step of planning and executing an attack to right perceived wrongs. The point, then, is that it is difficult to differentiate a terrorist from a) a Muslim with exclusivist religious beliefs or b) a non-Muslim with political grievances, neither of whom are deserving of incrimination if they do not express themselves in a violent manner.

Complicating this response further is the question of responsibility and citizenship in a liberal democracy. A citizen must demonstrate loyalty by observing the laws and customs and accepting the core values of the state, but does this loyalty mean one must be vigilant against crimes that others may commit? Clearly, if a citizen believes a threat is real or imminent or a terrorist attack is being planned, it is his or her duty to discourage those who would carry them out and to report the suspicious activity or persons to law enforcement authorities.

But no citizen – and by extension, no Muslim citizen – should be obliged to spy on friends or family at the behest of law enforcement authorities. Individuals cannot actively spy on or stand vigil against one another without breaking the trust of the social group to which they belong. This means that individuals who take on a role as informant or 'mole' have adopted a state function that effectively forces them to break ties with their particular community. It may prove necessary for law enforcement agencies to employ such persons to counter terrorism within the Muslim

community, but the responsibility to partake in spying goes beyond the expectations of citizenship, which is why individuals like Sohail are paid for their services.

Commentators have increasingly called upon the Muslim community to say or do any number of things to demonstrate their capacity to be loyal to the state. But one cannot blame an entire community for the actions of a few if there isn't sufficient evidence that the community sympathizes with or supports them. The Muslim community bears collective responsibility for terrorist activity only if it aids and abets those who commit it – in other words, if the leadership preaches terrorism or encourages members of the congregation to engage in terrorist activity. *Britz* gives the impression that British imams are actively promoting terrorism against governments internal and external to the country; in actuality, this does not appear to be the case in Britain, and it certainly isn't in Canada.

Because terrorists often invoke religion to justify heinous acts, leaders of organizational bodies and institutions that comprise the Muslim community do bear responsibility to educate and instruct individuals against terrorism and other such crimes by virtue of the power and authority with which the Muslim constituency and the wider Canadian public has entrusted them. Most leaders already know that certain elements of the scriptural texts were revealed and interpreted during times of war and conquest, and that the prescriptions reflect a context that in some cases no longer has bearing today. Unfortunately, some Muslims do not understand that dividing the world in terms of *dar-al-islam* and *dar-al-harb* makes little sense in present circumstances; that political action does not mean violence; and that killing others is not part of the mandate of Islam. Leaders need to put forward alternative worldviews that counter more extremist interpretations of Islam – worldviews that are tolerant of others and conducive to peace. There is much within the scriptures and the life example of Prophet Muhammad to support this worldview: Muhammad was known to have endured religious and political oppression for many years, and yet his compassion and willingness to forgive garnered widespread respect, even amongst the non-Muslims of his time. He was also imbued with a strong sense of hope: despite the numerous setbacks in his personal and public life, his trust in God was such that he did not experience the despair that leads terrorists to assert their agency by violent means.

But if leaders of the Muslim community have work to do, so too does the political establishment in liberal democratic societies. Like their Muslim counterparts, they cannot ignore the responsibility entrusted to them by the citizenry. Their obligation is to convince frustrated Muslims – by way of action and policy – that they aren't living in a *de facto dar-al-harb*; that there isn't an all-out war being waged against Islam and Muslims; and that Muslims will be treated with the respect and dignity that is owed to them as to all citizens of a liberal democratic state.

