

Terrorism Accusation as a Phase in Conflict of Civilizations: A Reading of The Evolution of Islamic Violence in the Western Mind

Tarek Ladjal and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor

Department of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies,
University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: Throughout all stages relations between Islam and the Christian world has been dominated by specific stereotypes of each other. Historic events have played a clear role in the development of the intellectual perception of the two parties concerning each other. Perhaps the analysis of the West's relationship with Islam requires a return to history to disassemble the stages of cognitive development of those images of each other to better understand the renewed conflict between the parties. This paper attempts to analyse the charge of terrorism, which has become the preserve of Islam, through its development in the western intellectual context from the earliest relationships between the two worlds. The discussion includes the Crusades, colonialism and orientalism up to present times. Such a discussion was accentuated by the severely strained relationship between Islam and the West following the events of September 11. The study reached the conclusion that the association of violence with Islam in the Western mind can be historically traced back to the earliest relationship between the parties and that any attempt at serious dialogue between civilizations requires an objective return to those historical events and perceptions, which continue to dominate contemporary attitudes.

Key words: Islam • West • Terrorism • Middle Age • Violence • Conflict • Clash of civilization

INTRODUCTION

Muslim-Western relations can be traced back to the earliest periods following the emergence of Islam as a new religion. This is seen in the battle of Mu'ta in 629 AD and then the Battle of Yarmuk in 636 AD. These were the first points of contact between the new Islamic world and the old Christian world. The second battle appears to have been decisive in regards to Muslim-Western relations as it ended the Byzantine presence in the south of the Mediterranean, which for centuries, was an extension of Rome and Byzantium. These initial points of contact resulted in numerous undesirable consequences for the image of the other in the mind both parties. With the defeat of the Roman in 636 AD, Islam became an enemy in the mind of the majority of Westerners competing against the Roman designs of a global Roman civilization. Events associated with Islam and the Muslims exerted expanding influence and Islam was rapidly establishing its dominance, which was seen as an

ongoing threat to the edification of Western civilization, which has enjoyed, since the days of Alexander, sovereignty over the ancient world and a general unity of spirit after the fourth century [1].

In light of the above, European reactions to Islamic expansion, especially after its control over Jerusalem, the spiritual capital of Christianity, were often the result of their jaded perception towards Islam and Muslims and failed to objectively consider the entire context. This led to a long-term systematic war and psychological symbolism by undermining all aspects of the Islamic phenomenon. The mechanisms for the construction of a stereotypical perception of the other developed over a number of stages but tended to uniformly stereotype Muslims and Islam in the context of an ongoing war. The status of Islam in the general European context was that of a new enemy that differs in capabilities and abilities from the ancient Persian enemy, in terms of values, ideas, beliefs and the social systems it implemented in newly conquered lands. According to

Fernand Braudel, this European orientation was logical and consistent with the nature of relations between the two civilizations at that time [2]. How else would the European stand be towards Islam, which completely absorbed its influence in Asia and North Africa, established its authority and influence in the Middle East since 655 AD and developed plans for the conquest of the Eastern capital of Constantinople since the first years of its birth?

The conflict between the two worlds was largely based on this foundation. Stereotypes of the other appeared as a defensive mechanism adopted by the Christian world towards the growing danger of the Islamic phenomenon. Collisions between the two worlds evolved over time from military confrontation to a war of words and ideas [3] and finally to the media war in the form of the mass export of Islam as a religion of terror and intimidation. This paper analyses the various stages in the evolution of the conflict Christian-Muslim. This includes a discussion of the concept of violence in Islam from the very beginnings of Islam to the present day in order to better understand the hostile attitude of the West towards Islam because of the charge of terrorism and the growing phenomenon of Islamophobia, opposition to immigration and the extreme right.

Theological Confrontation of Islam: According to Edward Said, al-Jābirī believed that the epistemological basis in the Western approach to the relationship between the Western civilization and the Islamic civilization is to assert the ego of one over the other [4]; meaning portraying the image of the other in such a way that meets specific purposes one wants for the other [5]. As such, after the comprehensive political defeat and loss of the entire Roman territory south of the Mediterranean, Christian theology initiated a new front of conflict based on the

intellectual discussion of Islam that attempted to discredit its credibility as a religion in order to undermine its legitimacy. This began very early on with John of Damascus, who grew up in an Islamic Arab Byzantine environment and contributed greatly to the polemical dialectic between Islam and Christianity. He promoted a kind of “rationalization” similar to the style of debate that took place on theological issues among Muslim and Christian theologians.¹ John of Damascus contributed towards the epistemological foundations from which certain features of a Muslim were drawn and questioned the fact that Islam is the pure religion of Abraham by means of his description of Muslims as Saracens.² John discussed Islam as a Christian heresy and splinter group and talked about Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet [6]. This image of Muslims was adopted, according to Zhuravsky, by the Byzantines [7], in which Muhammad (PBUH) remained in their collective conscience as a magician and the anti-Christ who embodies the image of the devil. The following image crystallized the image of Islam: “It is a belief system invented by Muhammad, which is characterized by lies and deliberate distortion of the facts, it is the religion of compulsion, moral decay and indulgence with sensual pleasures and desires, it is a religion of violence and cruelty.”[7] This Byzantine stereotype of Islam was later inherited by Europe [7]. In her book entitled “Glauben und Wissen” (Belief and Knowledge), The German Sigrid Hunke 1913-1999, explains how the European Church portrayed Islam³ and the Muslim world as a world of myths and legends, Satanists and devil worshipers... a land of human sacrifice to idols made of gold and is protected by a league of demons headed by a person named Muhammad” [8].

The majority of researchers agree that the initial perceptions and images that formed the Christian imagination of Islam⁴ was obscure and mysterious and

¹ See: Douglas Ainslie, John of Damascus, Nabu Press, USA, 2011; Daniel J. Sahas, John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites.", Brill, Leiden, 1972.

² See: Daniel J. Sahas, Ibid, p 12; J. V. Tolan, Saracens, p 10; Daniel J. Sahas, The Arabic character in the Christian discourse with Islam, *Journal or Ijtihad*, Vol 2, No 28, Cairo, 1995, pp 126-127

³ Diane Morgan points to the position of Martin Luther 1483-1546AD towards Islam and his role in determining the position of the Protestant Church towards Islam and the formulation of the modern European mental stereotype of Islam. Martin Luther describes the Quran as: a hateful, terrible and damned book full of lies, myths and atrocities... He was of the view that it was the responsibility of the priests to publically preach that of the atrocities of Muhammad so that the Christians will increase in their hostility towards him, to strengthen their faith in Christianity, to increase in their resistance against the Muslim Turks and to sacrifice their wealth and themselves in these wars. Diane Morgan, *Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice*, Greenwood Publication, California, 2010, 36

⁴ Expect a few names such as: John of Damascus, Yahya Ibn Adi and some Christian theologian whom lived in the ninth century in Bagdad.

not based on informed knowledge of the origins of Islam and its foundational texts. According to most researchers,⁵ it focused on three major themes:

- Celestial invalidity of Islam by accusing its Prophet with heresy and deception
- Associating the attributes of terrorism, violence and nomadism to Islam and Muslims
- Projecting Islam as a religion of sensuality that incites base instincts and vices

These Christian stereotypes about Islam formed gradually and expressed the risks associated with each phase of European Christian attention towards the Islamic phenomenon. Rodinson opines that the Christian West's attention towards Islam reflects "a threat before they become a problem" [9]. Initially this attention began with Eastern Christianity and the original Christians,⁶ followed by the rapid expansion of Islam in their lands. The relationship then took a more serious turn with the intensification of the confrontation between the Christians and Muslims in the context of the historical conflict over the Mediterranean. Animosity further intensified with the rapid progress of the Ottoman Turks in central Europe and their conquest of the eastern capital of Christendom in 1453, their advancement on Rome, the second capital of Christendom, after the Battle of Nicopolis in 1391 and their two month siege of Vienna in 1529 and 1683.⁷ In any case, it can be easily claimed that the Christian "image" of Islam, i.e. the Christian consciousness of the other, is a product of "literature primarily developed by the men of the church, theologians,⁸ historians and preachers for the simple reason that from the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance, the clergy, monks, priests and church employees possessed and monopolised learning and education. They bred believers through their writings and teachings" [10].

Literary Creativity as a Tool in the Context of Competition: The theologians did not limit themselves to

developing an image of the other in the Western conscience, but also impacted on different segments of Western societies largely through education as an intermediary for the transfer of ideas and the cultivation of attitudes. The intellectual and literary elite created a fertile environment for development of this negative mental image and marketing representations that continue to influence, until today, the image of Islam and Muslims in the West through evolving formulas and approaches. Maxime Rodinson described part of this issue and presented many images of the Messenger of Islam in literary works, [10] which have inspired poetry and epics that were popularised by travelling poets. Such imagery was retained by Western culture, are common in textbooks and refers to the efforts of Latin authors who, between 1100 and 1140, took it upon themselves to ensure the aversion of the common populace to Islam and the Prophet... They directed their attention toward the life of Muhammad, who remained in their minds a sorcerer who destroyed the Church in Africa and the Middle East through magic and deceit and permitted sexual contacts! [10] Most of the travelling poets considered Muhammad as the chief of the Bedouin gods. The French orientalist Cara de Vaux expressed his surprise with this portraying saying, "For a long time Muhammad remained known by this negative image in the West. There are almost no bad fairy tale or crude story that is not attributed, in one way or another, to him" [11].

The German thinker Hubert Kummer explained how the Europeans claimed that the Prophet of Islam was a Roman Catholic cardinal who was ignored by the church in his candidacy to become Pope and as a result established an atheist sect in the Middle East in retaliation to the church [12]. In the Middle Ages, Christian Europe regarded Muhammad as the greatest Christian who is responsible for removing half of humanity from the folds of Christianity. Kummer lists a number of philosophers and thinkers who have been involved in this project, such as Thomas Aquinas 1225-1247, the prominent Italian poet Dante Alighieri, the author of the "Divine Comedy", which describes his fictional journey to an alternate

⁵ Such as: Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*; David R. Blanks, Michael Frassetto, *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*; Richard William Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*.

⁶ In this regard, it is worth noting how the Christians labelled their propaganda against the Muslims, whereby they labelled them (The Sons of the bondwoman) based on an excerpt from the Gospel of Paul's letter to the Galatians, which concluded that Muslims who are (The Sons of the bondwoman) are excluded from the promise of divine salvation. Genesis 21:13

⁷ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p 72-77; John Stoye, *The Siege of Vienna: The Last Great Trial Between Cross & Crescent*, Pegasus Books, New York, 2000, p 3-11.

⁸ It should be noted here that when the Latin translation of the Quran was completed in 1509 AD, it was not permitted to be distributed. Schmidt N, "Early Oriental Studies in Europe and the Work of the American Oriental Society, 1842-1922", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol 43, No 5, USA, 1923, p. 3-4.

world, "How to torment the Prophet Muhammad and Ali ibn Abi Talib is in hell" [12]. As a result of this intellectual activity, the popular imagination of the people shifted and became interested in the other through rumours and humour and song. In this regard, the chants/songs/folklore/story emerged, which tell the stories of heroes, knights and battled and portrayed the Saracens [13] or Muslims⁹ as the subject of a public condemnation or cast the Arabs and Muslims as complete opposites to themselves. Perhaps the most famous of these is the "The Song of Roland" and "The Coronation of Louis"... etc., The other, a Muslim, is presented as the embodiment of all that is foreign, strange, negative and deserves condemnation, resulting in the retention of the image of a Muslim as a charmer and fierce warrior who loves and lives to war [13]. Of this stage, Norman says, "Strength was generally considered a founding element of the Islamic religion and intuitive sign of its misguidance" [13].

This early mental foundation of Western thought and its amplification of Muslim violence in that period, particularly its emphasis on the war like nature of Islam, are forms of Western justification of their aggression by way of their preparations to counter-attack against Islam. The general tactical abuse of this religion constitutes part of the process to form a collective negative image of Islam that promotes among Christians the need to respond to Islam's siege of their religion and the rehabilitation of Christianity, [13] which actualised through the Christian crusades.

From the Crusades to Colonialism: Montgomery Watt believes that the popular negative image of Islam that has thus far been referred to represent one of the most important intellectual phenomena to have appeared in Central Europe. It is not possible to understand the dialectic of the West and Islam without a careful understanding of these phenomena. Moreover, such a stereotype of the other facilitated the deep rooting of the "ideology of the crusades in the hearts and minds of Europeans regarding themselves and others" [14]. Furthermore, historic events played a role in accelerating the transformation of cognitive images and popular imagination to tangible actions. The failure of the Islamic armies in the capture of Constantinople in 718 and their defeat in Poitiers in 732" [15]. These two events constitute critical moments in history that "saved Europe" [16] from

Islam and gave them the Christians the opportunity to retain the northern Mediterranean as a strategic base to organise their counter-attack (the Crusades) and had profound effects on the various relationships that were to be witnessed in the region between Islam and Christianity.

If the stated goal of the Crusades manifested in its call for the restoration of the holy places militarily, its proponents approached this cause almost entirely based and on a collective imagination that elevates its self-image and presents the image of the other as satanic. Muslims were envisioned as the aggressive enemy they were obliged to confront [17] to the extent that it created within the Crusader the notion that "fighting against Muslims is him fighting against the forces of darkness in the championship of the light" [17].

After the flame of the Crusades extinguished in the last third of the thirteenth century, confrontations between Islamic and Christian parties quietened for a period of a century or more. However, the emergence of the Turks onto the arena of global politics and their western penetration into Europe rekindled the conflict of civilizations. In this context, politics became a fertile ground for the mass production of images and stereotypes of the other. After the Battle of Nicopolis in 1391, the Turks were a stone's throw away from Rome, the largest capital of the Christian West, [18] as such; all of Europe's political, economic and intellectual energies were dedicated to fight the threat of the Muslim Ottomans. The effects of this campaign remain visible to this day despite the many years and treaties that have passed since those times.

Western efforts met with considerable success in their management of the decline of the Ottoman Empire by means of further weakening its foundations and facilitating greater divisions within the Empire. This led to a new phase in the history of the conflict between the Islamic civilization and the Christian West as global power shifted to the northern end of the Mediterranean. In this phase a number of mechanisms were introduced to justify the invasion of Muslim lands such as a show of piety, to civilise the Muslim-Berber community as Duke Dimal had said, [19] to tame the savage people of the East, [20] to drive back Islam and uphold Christianity in the lands they have lost as Comte De Bourmont had justified the French occupation to Algeria, [21] in addition to economic reasons, along with a range of other justifications that were consistent with the collective

⁹ Some researchers argue that it means the oriental people in general. See: Philippe Sénac, *Musulmans et Sarrasins, dans le Sud de la Gaule du VIII au XI*. Ed. Le Sycomore, Paris, 1980, p. 63. Norman Daniel, *Sarrasins, chevaliers et moines dans les chansons de geste*, *Mélanges, MIDEO*, n° 17, 1986, p. 115. Jean Flori, *Radiographie d'un stéréotype: La Caricature de l'Islam dans l'Occident Chrétien: Sens et Contresens*, in *Maroc-Europe*, n° 3, 1992, p.94

European collective imagination towards Islam and Muslims. These justifications were employed to guide and justify the new face of the relationship between the two worlds.

Orientalism and the Invention of the Middle East:

The cultural and academic machinery in Europe that developed between the Crusades and colonialism sought a new understanding of Islam through the framework of Orientalism which failed to separate between the patternizing environment of Islam and the environment in which it was nurtured. Despite the many prominent figures and intellectual contributions of Orientalists and Orientalism, except that according to Edward Said, Eastern orientalism was largely in the service of colonialism [5] and [22]. By such means the Western discourse on Islam and Muslims crystallized by focusing on descriptions, epithets and accusations that collectively formed a body of stereotypes that became deeply rooted in the collective imagination of the Christian West.¹⁰ Of this, the Swiss thinker Marcel Boisard opined that the writings of Orientalists, with the rare exception, did not contribute much towards correcting Western understanding and popular imagination of Islam because Orientalism was originally a scientific discipline related to colonialism in France and Britain among others. Its general objective was to accurately understand the Islamic/Muslim mentality to facilitate the colonial administration of the Islamic peoples and territories [23].

It can be observed through a review of Orientalist studies, especially those concerned with Islamic creed and history, that there has been a systematic attempt to remodel Islam and to focus on the issue of the spread of Islam by the sword and the predominance of violence among its adherents. In contrast, according to Edward Said, the majority of European studies of the Islamic civilization were approached through Western rationality that aimed towards self-assertion rather than constituting a substantive and objective study [5]. This sentiment was expressed in Said's famous phrase "The creation of the East." It is perhaps not surprising that there is little to no difference in the writings of the Orientalists in the Middle Ages with the works of European litterateurs and poets. There was little change in the popular image of the other according to Zachary Lockman [24]. Easterners were commonly regarded as irrational and mentally weak, which causes them to resort to violence, unlike the Europeans who are rational and mentally superior [5].

Islam as an Auxiliary Enemy: With the end of the twentieth century and the decline of Orientalism and its replacement by centres for Middle Eastern studies, the political balance changed especially in regards to the Western academic approach to Islam that now viewed Islam as a cultural and political phenomenon. Western involvement in the Cold War resulted in a softer stance towards Islam politically, militarily and intellectually. Communism replaced Islam as the number one global threat. However, the sudden renewed Western interest in Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union [25] came as no surprise, especially with the increasing number of propositions of a clash of civilizations, which opined that the next war will be differences of culture and civilization [26]. In this context, Islam was more than often nominated as the enemy of the West. Regardless of the debate about the credibility of this theory and its inability to attract a broad stream of scientific and political elite in the West, at the operational level, it found a footing within certain government agencies in the United States and Europe. The events of September 11 had the final say in the dialectical relationship between Islam and the West. The events of September 11 constituted a gateway to rethink many policies on a wide range of issue be they diplomatic, security, military and even cultural towards the Muslim world. Increased pressures were exerted to eliminate the so-called sources of terrorism and the causes of religious extremism. Educational reforms were also encouraged [27]. Many Western educational centres were quick to level the charge of terrorism against Islam and Muslims, reviewing the historical rhetoric of violence and aggression concerning Islam and Muslims, [27] in order to kick-start and justify the global war on terrorism. In this context, the biased stereotypes of Islam and Muslims that lay dormant from the Middle Ages were renewed, but this time through the many sophisticated approaches of the media [27]. The aim of the media was simply to stereotype the other based on his/her religious or ethnic affiliations [28]. Westerners resorted to the form of media stereotyping when intending to judge Islam and characterize it based on prejudices, which reduce the Muslim world with all its various components and groups and truncates the variety within Islam to a selection of extremist ideas that are rejected by the vast majority of Muslims.¹¹ It is clear that this campaign has worked during the past on the composition of propaganda operations aimed at Arabization and Islamization of "terrorism" and by such means the Arab and Muslim

¹⁰ Edward Said believes that the stereotypical Western vision of the East in art and literature dates back to the covenants prior to the advent of Islam. He supports his claim by means of the vision Aeschylus for the composition of the Persian community

¹¹ Halliday argue that judging all Muslim based on the action of tiny fraction of Muslims is unfair. see Halliday, Fred: *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 2003, p 107

world became the victims of the media's "demonization of the enemy" [29] i.e. transforming the Arabs and Muslims, without exception, to evil metastasizes and sources of terror and intimidation.¹² Western media seems to be devoted to such an end by providing outrages statistics, promoting religious hatred through cartoons and caricatures, or field research in Islamic countries that portray Muslims as backward and extremists who hate among others. Such acts fall under what Braudel considered the instinctual hatred between civilizations [2].

CONCLUSION

For the most part of the relationship between the Islamic and the Western world, they were not on good terms. Stereotypes and pre-conceived notions of the others dominated this relationship as they constituted defence mechanisms when the West felt weaker than Islam, whereas they constituted mechanisms of attack in the stages wherein they felt more powerful. Islam developed in the Western mind as a religion of violence throughout all stages of the relationship between the two civilizations. This is true for the early theological war that started against Islam when it was weak, to the proliferation of stereotypical literature in the intermediary stage, to the Crusades and the accompanied acts of propaganda that assumed an ecclesiastical nature to justify their military aggression, through to the stage of colonialism, which claimed violence and the lack of urbanization as reasons to occupy most of the Islamic world. For this, an army of scholars and Orientalists were employed knowingly and unknowingly for the development of an image of the East and Islam that serves the political agenda of the European colonial masters. This also holds true for the contemporary period and the emergence of the war on terrorism launched by the events of 11 September, which never departed from the Western intellectual tradition and its stereotypical portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence and terrorism.

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¹² We believe that terrorism could not be justified under any reason and that there is no religion of terrorism. In this regard, some academics argue that this form of terrorism should be seen as a strategic reaction to American power: that America is an empire and empires provoked resistance in the form of terrorism. The Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, for example, all suffered from terrorist attacks and had terrorist organizations - the Black Hand, Young Bosnia, Narodnaya Volya - spawned from their multiple ethnic groups, religions and national identities. See, Albert J. Bergesen and Omar Lizardo (March 2004). "Theories of Terrorism: A Symposium". *Sociological Theory* 22 (1): 38-52

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