

NewsMaker: A different kind of Muslim

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Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi is emerging as an unlikely voice of moderation in Islam

A few years back, Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi, the secretary-general of the Italian Muslim Association, imam at the Shafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence, and the co-chair of Islam-Israel Fellowship at the Root and Branch Association, addressed a group of conservative-leaning Jews in Manhattan. After hearing him cite a Koranic passage endorsing Zionism (The Night Journey, 17:104), deriding terror groups for misinterpreting religious texts to advance their "pseudo-Islamic radicalist" agenda, and endorsing a "Jordan is Palestine" solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the invited guests were taken aback. Was the bearded sheikh really a hawkish rabbi? One participant asked Palazzi if he received death threats, to which he shook his head. On the way out, the participant sighed, and said: "If the terrorists don't want to kill him, he's probably not that important."

Today, Palazzi, 43, is emerging as an unlikely voice of moderation in a religion whose leaders are viewed by many as apathetic, if not sympathetic, to terror abroad and oppression at home. A student of Sheikh Muhammad Shaarawi (an Egyptian cleric who promoted Jewish-Muslim relations and backed Anwar Sadat's decision to make peace with Israel), Palazzi is a harsh critic of the anti-Semitism that has come to pervade Islam.

A proponent of Israeli Tourism Minister Benny Elon's voluntary transfer plan, Palazzi opposes the US-backed road map on the grounds that it rewards Palestinian terror. His most vocal criticism, however, is reserved for the Saudis, whom he sees as the main force behind the rise of extremism in Islam.

Whether one agrees with his views or not, Palazzi's voice is a sign that pluralism may finally be returning to Islam.

How did anti-Semitism enter mainstream Islam?

It's a consequence of Britain's foreign policy immediately after World War I. The original Weizmann-Feisal agreement was one of friendship and cooperation between the Zionist movement and the leaders of the Hashemite family, and the acceptance of the creation

of two states - a Jewish state and an Arab kingdom, with the Jordan River as the natural border. Had that agreement been respected by the British, the Jewish state would have been born 30 years earlier, and the Arab and Zionist movements would have cooperated.

Unfortunately, the Foreign Office empowered the house of Saud, which promotes cultural Wahhabism, a belief that has anti-Semitism as one of its defining features. Until today, Saudis are using their oil money to promote anti-Semitism in the Arab world and beyond.

Can you really reduce Muslim anti-Semitism to Saudi influence?

When Emir Feisal declared in 1919 that he was welcoming the Jews home, no one used a religious argument against him. Maybe some said that from a political point of view we are not inclined to accept your idea of cooperating with the Zionist movement, but no one said that Islam forbids cooperating with the Zionists, or that Islam prevents us from accepting the existence of a Jewish state. That ideology, which is so widespread in the Arab world today, simply did not exist.

Even today, if you look at how anti-Semitism is spread in the Arab world, it is done by translating anti-Semitic European literature like The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Roger Garaudy into Arabic. If you look for sources in classical Arabic literature, you can't find them.

Of course, many leaders understand that promoting hostility against Israel prevents the spread of democracy to their own countries. As long as those countries go on being dictatorial regimes, they need scapegoats, and it's easy to hold Israel responsible for everything that is wrong at home.

I think that fighting democracy and spreading anti-Semitism are two sides of the same agenda.

Is the West sufficiently aware of the threat of Islamic extremism?

No. After 9/11, President Bush invited Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah to his ranch in Texas, and told him: "You are our ally in the war against terrorism."

The reality is that Prince Abdullah contributed funds to both the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaida.

Prince al-Turki, former head of the Saudi secret service, is practically the founder of al-Qaida. The relatives of the victims of 9/11 sued him for damages [the suit was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction], but now that same sponsor of terrorism is the Saudi ambassador to Britain, where he publishes poems praising suicide terrorists in British newspapers.

The power of the oil companies in the Western world is such that the role of the House of Saud as the main supporter of extremism and international terrorism goes on being covered up.

Is there a counter-appeal to Islamic fundamentalism in the West?

We should try to create a moderate Muslim education network which can balance the influence of the extremist network, but it is a hard task because the extremists have huge funds at their disposal.

If you look at the rest of the Muslim world, anti-Semitism is not common in Turkey or former Soviet Muslim republics like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan; it was not part of any political agenda. But I think that the situation in the West is different because Muslims who live there in most cases can only attend Saudi-controlled mosques, Islamic schools and Islamic centers. In general, the countries in the Muslim world that are closer to democracy are the most friendly with the West, and those in which extremism is limited. So the logical consequence should be that Muslims in the West are the most open-minded. But the role of the extremist network in taking control of the mosques means that the opposite has happened.

One of the effects of 9/11 in North America is that those who were afraid to be heard are starting to speak about the danger of fundamentalist and extremist networks. If the number of those speaking out increases, the public will start understanding that the extremists have no right to speak for Islam.

You've stated that the Palestinians have no religious or historical right to Judea and Samaria, and that the Koran endorses a Jewish return to the Holy Land. How should Muslims respond to the establishment of a Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria?

I think that those Palestinians who abide by Israeli law have a right to go on living in Judea and Samaria, exactly like Israeli Arabs in Galilee or Beduin Arabs in the Negev. However, I do not think that being a minority in a certain country gives that minority the right to claim a state of its own. Consequently, I think that every Muslim should protest the idea of a PLO-controlled state in Judea and Samaria. The area of Palestine is already divided into a Jewish Palestinian state, Israel, and an Arab Palestinian state, Jordan; creating a third Palestinian state for the PLO is neither in the interests of Israel nor in the interest of Jordan, and even less in the interests of those Palestinian Arabs who would be compelled to live under a barbaric regime.

Moreover, accepting the creation of such a state would mean that terror works. Many Muslims rejoiced when the US administration liberated the Muslims of Iraq from Saddam Hussein. I think those same Muslims must protest when the White House pressures Israel to accept the creation of another dictatorial regime in the Arab world.

Muslims need democracy, and democracy for the Muslims of Judea and Samaria can only be granted by Israel.

Yet millions of Palestinians, and the majority of Israelis, support an eventual Palestinian state. What's the solution?

I think the biggest step toward real peace in the Middle East was the war in Lebanon: By expelling Arafat and the PLO, the level of terrorism was reduced. If they had let Arafat die in Tunis and never permitted his close associates to come back, terrorism would have been defeated within 10 or 20 years, and it would have been possible for a new leadership to emerge in favor of some kind of political agreement to grant the residents of the West Bank their rights as a foreign minority living in Israel.

Oslo simply destroyed that opportunity by bringing Arafat back and giving him control of the population. After [prime minister Ehud] Barak, Israelis voted for [Ariel] Sharon, the man who expelled Arafat and expanded settlements in Judea and Samaria, but now even Sharon is abiding by the principle of withdrawal.

Israel needs a leader who is able to say that negotiations with the PLO are not a solution, who says that we oppose the creation of a Palestinian state now and in the future, and that we will establish administrative autonomy [with Jordanian citizenship] for Arab inhabitants of the West Bank.

If President Bush claims that the war against terrorism is a global war, and that the solution is to spread democracy, Israelis have the same right to fight against Yasser Arafat and Sheikh Yassin [killed by Israel a week after this interview] as the United States has to fight against the Taliban, Saddam Hussein or al-Qaida.

Did you ever run into Jews who disagree with your activism?

It happens frequently. Until recently, most of my opponents in Rome were leftist Jews, criticizing me as an enemy of the peace process. I remember when some of my friends wanted me to speak at the Jewish center in Rome, [the center] opposed the idea, claiming that I'm an extremist. Some weeks later, they invited Yasser Abed Rabbo and Sari Nusseibeh to be their guests; they called them moderate leaders of the Palestinian Authority.

I told them if someone thinks Sari Nusseibeh is a moderate, then I'm glad he considers me an extremist.



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