

Interview

On the diversity of the “Muslim World” - On local Human Rights defenders - On Western HR associations sanitizing the Muslim Right

Sunday 4 February 2018, by [HEINTZ Andy](#), [HELIE Anissa](#) (Date first published: 12 December 2017).

Anissa Helie is an assistant professor at John Jay College. She has written powerful academic articles like *Multiculturalist Liberalism and Harms to Women: Looking Through the Issue of the ‘Veil’* and she wrote the Introduction: Policing gender, sexuality and ‘Muslimness’ for the book “Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Resistance and Restrictions”, which she edited with Homa Hoodfar.

Andy Heintz - How important is it for people in the West to understand that issues like homosexuality and abortion are open to diverse interpretations in the Qur’an?

Anissa Helie - Along other scholars and activists, I have pointed out that - contrary to claims that Muslim-majority nations’ treatment of social issues are primarily informed by their adherence to key Islamic sources such as the Qur’an - the broad cultural and political diversity of Muslim societies, as well as the variation in religious interpretation, cannot be overlooked. As a result of this diversity, and despite references to a “Muslim world” that is presumed to be homogenous, legal approaches and national policies can be quite varied on a number of issues. Issues related to sexuality and women’s bodily rights (including same-sex behavior and abortion) are no different, and are legislated in very different ways in various Muslim-majority societies.

For example, as I have shown with regard to abortion, data from 2009 related to 42 Muslim countries highlight the wide scope of legal approaches with regard to voluntary termination of pregnancy - ranging from complete prohibition, to abortion being allowed on a variety of grounds: either to preserve the woman’s physical health, or to preserve her mental health, or on the basis of socio-economic factors, or even without any restriction, i.e. on request. Over 15 years ago, when I started writing on same-sex relations in Muslim contexts, 26 Muslim-majority countries condemned homosexuality as a criminal offense, with alleged “offenders” facing penalties ranging from forced medical procedures (e.g. anal testing) to imprisonment or even the death penalty. Aren’t such empirical examples making clear enough the fact that “issues like homosexuality and abortion are open to different interpretations” in the legal arenas of various Muslim-majority societies?

Why, then, does it seem necessary to some commentators to frame this question with such an emphasis on the religious realm: why is it relevant to focus on the Qur’an in relation to social issues such as sexuality or termination of pregnancy? Why is the religious text seen as so important in this early 21st century? And by whom is the Qur’an (or the Sunnah, or hadith) casted as paramount in defining citizens’ rights? By formulating this question in such a way, aren’t “people in the West” at risk of legitimizing Muslim political actors (whether governments or other entities, including non-state actors) who tend to rely on religious claims when politically expedient, and often to secure their own power?

Drawing a parallel with non-Muslim contexts may help to drive the point home: do people routinely refer to the Bible when envisaging social issues relevant to modern societies with a Christian tradition (e.g. European or Latin American nations)? Or, do we systematically assume that the Torah necessarily impacts the life decisions of, e.g., (all and any) Jewish New Yorkers? I am afraid that the question itself reinforces an assumption about the primacy of Islam (and of Quranic interpretations) as an essential factor in the lives of "Muslims" - an assumption that most people do not hold with regard to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, etc. Hence, I am not sure that the constituency you refer to - i.e. "people in the West" - need to be further encouraged to look at Muslim-majority societies primarily through the prism of Islam.

Instead, one issue that may be worth enquiring about would be: why do so many Westerners, both scholars and lay people, display such an overwhelming interest in the Qur'an? Often, it is because they confuse and conflate the religious and social realms, attributing more impact of the former onto the latter than is wise to do. Several experts - among them, French scholar of Islam Maxime Rodinson in the 1960s, or Columbia professor Mahmood Mamdani in the wake of 9-11 - have criticized this long-standing (and still widespread) Western tendency to apprehend most trends affecting Muslim communities with exclusive references to Islam. Rodinson is even credited to have coined the term "theologocentrism" to describe this phenomenon which, by privileging the religious, ignores other significant historical and social developments affecting Muslim-majority societies.

Decades ago, Rodinson analyzed and debunked the notion of a *homo islamicus*, an entity that was constructed as essentially different from the (imagined) Western man. As he noted in the 1980s: *"In the nineteenth century, [the Oriental] became something quite separate, sealed off in his own specificity. This is the origin of the homo islamicus, a notion widely accepted even today". Indeed, the assumption of a Muslim Other persists, whose "essential characteristics (...) could be identified [through the] study of certain key texts which were regarded as embodying the core principles of Islamic civilization. The Qur'an was naturally deemed to be first among these (...) [S]cholars believed that they could deduce the characteristics of the "Muslim mind," based on the assumption that all Muslims, from the rise of Islam until the present, were constrained to think and believe and act within the rigid limits set by the essential character of the civilization to which they belonged."*

Yet, the issue may well be political, as noted by journalist Warda Mohamed:

"It's with great rigor and without any value judgement that Rodinson contradicts those who, by adopting an essentialist approach, look to Islam to offer an explanation for all the behaviors and actions of Muslims (...) In the same vein as during Rodinson's times, we must ask ourselves why and, above all, who continue to analyze Muslim societies and the misdeeds of Muslims exclusively through the religious. And we must ask ourselves for which purpose are such questions instrumentalized. (...) How must we analyze the societies of the Muslim world? Does Islam offer an analytical tool to understand these societies' development and their problems? To these questions, which are still being asked today, Maxime Rodinson attempted to provide answers about 50 years ago."

Mohamed reminds us of Rodinson's own words, a reminder that is to be timely: *"It is not the Qur'an that molds society - instead, it is society that draws from the Qur'an what can be matching it [what can correspond with/to it?]." [Original quote = "Ce n'est pas le Coran qui façonne la société mais la société qui puise dans le Coran ce qui peut lui correspondre.".] "*

Rodinson specifically emphasized socio-historical developments and economic structures as crucial factors, and believed these shape(d) Muslim-majority societies in more significant ways than religion. Other researchers have embraced Rodinson's rejection of the dominant Western approach with regard to Muslim cultures (the "theologocentrique school of thought"), and made similar observations with regard to gender and sexuality norms.

For example, twenty years ago, Lebanese-American professor As'ad AbuKhalil wondered: *"How can Islam be used as a standard methodological yardstick when the diversity of Muslim lifestyles and interpretations are apparent to the researcher?"* AbuKhalil also deplored the fact that *"The tendency to attribute all manners of sociopolitical life and systems of thought to the Islamic theological worldview has for long*

been a staple of Western studies of Islam.”

It is now clear this particular bias is no longer restricted to academia, but has spread among the public at large. The anecdote related by Mamdani regarding the 2001 spike in sales of the Qur'an, just after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, is telling in this respect:

“I was in New York when 9/11 happened. It surprised me when I saw the craze to buy copies of the Quran in America (...) They want[ed] to find the reasons for Muslims' rage in the Quran.” But, he asks, *“Why didn't the Bible's sales shoot up when America attacked Afghanistan and Iraq?”* So, yes, the Qur'an may well provide key guidance to some believers; the sunna (i.e. post coranic tradition related to the life of prophet Muhammad, specifically his sayings and deeds as reported by his family and entourage) is a rather important source of guidance as well, also in terms of Muslim jurisprudence. But again, religion matters only for those to whom it matters (whether believers or cynical politicians). And - as hinted in the interview question - the fact remains that interpretation of religious sources is key: all religious traditions can be understood as offering either a conservative, exclusionary, blueprint or, on the contrary, an emancipatory path to those who subscribe to any particular faith. Feminist theologians of the Qur'an, (Muslim scholars such as Riffat Hassan in Pakistan, Amina Wadud in the United States, Siti Musdah Mulia in Indonesia, or Kecia Ali in South Africa), have struggled to promote interpretations that are grounded in religious texts while upholding, for example, the rights of women and of stigmatized sexual minorities.

Do well-intentioned outside groups often make the mistake of taking stances and making demands in countries without first notifying feminists and LGBT activist groups within those countries of what they plan to do? Does this sometimes undermine the goals the activists inside these countries are working towards bringing about?

A range of seemingly “well-intentioned outside groups” dealing with human rights issues do indeed devise and adopt strategies that are ultimately detrimental to progressive groups - feminist and otherwise - working locally in other contexts. While I (still) recognize that some of these outside groups may simply be mistaken, the fact is that I've witnessed such mistakes being repeated over the span of close to three decades. I am therefore no longer sure that it is truly a matter of “making mistakes”, nor am I convinced that these groups are as well-intentioned as they portray, or imagine, themselves to be.

What motivates these outside groups not only to fail to “first notify” local progressive groups but also to repeatedly ignore their warnings and consistent feedbacks? Why should outside groups undermine the work undertaken by local human rights defenders who should clearly be seen as their allies - since, in the words of Algerian feminist Louisa Ait-Hamou, they are the ones who *“have fought fundamentalism and terrorism in isolation with our bare hands for a good number of years”*?

Sadly, such a situation can only be explained at times by the arrogance displayed by various Left and human rights organizations based in the West. Instead of recognizing the expertise developed - over years/ decades and at great cost - by local human rights defenders, these outside organizations appear convinced, deep down - and whether they are aware of their biases or not - that they know better (than their brown little brothers and sisters?). Or so it seems - a recent example : in 2016, Professor Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian-Irish-Canadian citizen living in Montreal, was arrested while traveling in Iran and held in Tehran at the notorious Evin prison for several months (she was in solitary and without access to medicines or a lawyer for most of that time). Following the lead of Homa's family and lawyers, campaigners seeking her release focused on Professor Hoodfar's academic credentials and downplayed any advocacy work, including her decades-long involvement with Women Under Muslim Laws International Solidarity Network (WLUMI).

As one of the people working closely with Homa's family, I was contacted in June 2016 by Michelle Kissenkoetter, then Director of Asia Desk at the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH). Initially, Ms. Kissenkoetter did the right thing: she consulted us - the people most affected by, and most involved in, the case, asking whether we would welcome a Press Release or an Urgent Appeal issued by the FIDH. I wish to note here that while a fairly basic and logical step, this approach is far from being systematic. I welcomed her support, indicating our preference for a press release and explaining that *“In*

terms of issuing an Urgent Appeal, it seems best not to use that option at this stage — because the family”still don’t think we want to frame [Homa’s] work through that type of lens.“ I also shared useful documents pertaining to the campaign, stressing that, because Homa’s legal team “emphasizes Homa’s balanced academic research, and given the sensitivity of her case, we ask you to please make sure that your own letter sticks to the carefully worded message of the [family’s] press release.“ I was thanked for my “very helpful feedback“ and, shortly after, Ms. Kissenkoetter shared the FIDH’s press release, noting that it had already “been sent out to the media and is posted on FIDH’s website“. Unfortunately, while the actual the press release did rely on the data endorsed by Homa’s legal team, which I had shared, the FIDH had added a short introductory paragraph that could be detrimental.

I reacted promptly: “Despite trying to ensure, in part through our exchange, that the press release issued by the FIDH relies on information as confirmed on the Homa website, it appears that the FIDH press release refers to information that is in fact not helpful to Homa’s case. The legal team working on Homa’s case is requesting that I convey the following:”Could you please ask that FIDH to revise it on their website?“ The reason being: “The FIDH statement references a Conservative Iranian media report about the charges that are rumors and pure speculation **at this point** [emphasis in my original email] until an official statement has been made. Dear Michelle, we would therefore appreciate if you could delete the reference to the following sentence (...).“ Ms. Kissenkoetter did accept to remove one specific reference from their website but, dismissing our full request, refused to delete the quote from the media report at stake...insisting she knew better: “In our decades of work on Iran and other countries, we have often cited such sources [and] (...) we are going to keep this quote in our statement.“ she wrote back.

Furthermore, obviously missing the point, she also amended the FIDH press release in a way that made it worse: while Homa’s legal team wanted NO mention of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Ms. Kissenkoeter introduced further information pertaining to WLUML:

“We have added a footnote within the quote which explains what the organisation”Women Living Under Muslim Laws“is, and linking to their website. We have done this as a counter to the assertion made in the quote from Mashregh that WLUML is a”subversive organization“. You can find the edited version of the statement here.”

Worried that, in fact, this uncalled-for modification would bring even more attention to Homa’s association with WLUML, I wrote again, but received no reply. A day later, Homa’s niece (Ms. Ghahremani, who was at the forefront of campaigning efforts on behalf of her aunt) reached out to Ms. Kissenkoeter as well, explaining:

“I believe it has been brought to your attention that we have been issuing very specific directives about language being used to describe Homa’s situation. In your statement, you reference conservative Iranian media and their speculations about the charges. These charges have not been confirmed and circulating these rumors is actually more harmful to Homa’s case. We need to ensure that the statements of solidarity will be beneficial to both her legal case and the publicity of her situation. As such, I would like to kindly ask that you remove the sentence that references and cites Mashreq, and that you also do not highlight WLUML and the organization’s link with Homa. We need to keep to very specific language about who she is as an academic and not play into the language and allegations that are being made unofficially in Iran. Furthermore, our family should be the one to make the decision about when the best time is to address these allegations. We are currently discussing this internally and would greatly appreciate the time and opportunity to do so without the allegations gaining traction internationally. (...).“

Homa’s family never got even a courtesy response. I myself emailed Ms. Kissenkoeter again, using a stronger language, and concluding my message with the following: “As we engage in human rights work and try to support one another’s initiatives, a common motto should be”First do no harm“.“ Guess what: we never heard back and the FIDH statement was never modified to fully reflect Homa’s family’s strategic choices. Is there an alternative to thinking that the FIDH, through its Asia Desk director Ms. Kissenkoeter, feels it knows better?

It is alarming to witness the fact, over and over, that the FIDH is not the only human rights organization

to act in such an arrogant way: many other powerful outside groups dismiss the grounded knowledge of local human rights defenders. For example, country reports issued by Human Rights Watch as well as Amnesty International in the 1990s and pertaining to the situation in Algeria, (a country then facing mass killings of civilians perpetrated overwhelmingly by Islamist armed groups), also displayed a systematic disregard of local activists' knowledge and priorities. In these reports, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the Algerian government's violations of human rights, with very little acknowledgement of human rights violations perpetrated by Islamist armed groups. I once did a word count...truly shameful, and fully biased. Yet, at the very same time, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch relied on local contacts to obtain interviews with local activists. Once these activists had braved grave dangers to meet outside researchers (at a time when fundamentalist armed groups would randomly murder civilians using public transports), their testimonies would simply be ignored. Furthermore, when three early supporters of Amnesty's work in Algeria voiced their concerns about the biases in Amnesty's reporting (first internally, then, because they had received no answer, publicly), Amnesty simply terminated their membership - i.e. excluding them precisely when their country was facing a human rights crisis on a tremendous scale. Wasn't this a way to effectively assert that Amnesty knew better?

And in the late-1990s, when I confronted a team of Human Rights Watch researchers returning from a fact-finding mission in Algeria regarding their lack of documentation of the widespread violations of human rights perpetrated by non-state actors (in this case, Islamist armed groups such as the G.I.A. - Groupe Islamique Armé), I was told verbatim: *"This was not part of our mandate"*. Really? An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 civilians were murdered, mostly at the hand of armed jihadists, during the Bloody decade of the 1990s and it's not the business of prominent human rights organizations to report these massacres? How "well-intentioned" are these outside groups and how many decades should we believe their biases are just a matter of "making mistakes"?

Indeed, such outside groups appear at times to simply privilege the strategies that are beneficial to themselves/ their nation, at the expense of the broader context and, at times, at the expense of victims of fundamentalist extreme violence. A case in point is the issue surrounding Moazzam Begg, a former detainee in Guantanamo, and the group he founded in Britain: "Cage Prisoners". Gita Sahgal (then head of Amnesty's gender unit) lost her job in 2010 precisely for having exposed Amnesty's collusion with Begg whom she qualifies, rightly, as *"Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban"*. Meredith Tax describes the controversy most clearly in her 2013 book *"Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights"*. Most importantly, Tax shows how various Left and human rights groups, both in the UK and the USA, end up "sanitizing the Muslim Right". [1] Full disclosure: I assisted in editing this book.

Their initial motivation is clear, and commendable: human rights groups, such as Amnesty or the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) or the ACLU in the USA, seek to close detention centers such as Guantanamo and ensure due process for all - nothing wrong with that. Such a goal strengthens democratic principles, promotes the interests of American citizens and of those held in custody in US facilities: it serves to protect and promote human rights. But upholding human rights for all should not (let's be clear: should not-not-not) lead to sanitizing promoters of human rights violations. While perpetrators and advocates of terrorism do have rights and should be defended - as a matter of basic human rights - it is an insult to the victims of their murderous ideology to legitimize them and portray them as democratic poster-boys. A number of colleagues, mostly democrats and feminists, have had debates with the Center for Constitutional Rights, who represented Begg, over several years and at the highest level, interacting with the CCR's Board, including its Chair, and with the CCR's Executive Director Vince Warren.

Therefore, it is not that CCR is "making a mistake" when in January 2017 it promotes through its NYC-based "Freedom Flicks" film series a documentary entitled *"The Confession - Living the War on Terror"* (See Appendix 1). Promising that the film *"will keep viewers glued to the edge of their seats"*, CCR offers *"one man's riveting account"* as *"Mozzam Begg watched his home in Afghanistan turned to rubble and his religion demonized"*...

While we are at it, why not ensure that more Americans - rightly alarmed by the anti-Muslim racism rising in their country - will see Begg not for what he is - i.e. both a victim of US extrajudicial detention and an advocate of Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism - but just as a simple victim: the CCR planned to sell copies of Begg's book at the film venue (a well-known alternative cinema downtown NYC) and even to have a few copies given away for free at raffle: isn't that cool? "First, do no harm" is a really good idea. Personally, I no longer try to talk to "well-intentioned" groups such as CCR, ACLU, Amnesty or the kind. I've tried for nearly 30 years and it just makes me sick: it is sickening and simply, truly upsetting.

And, anyway, let's not fool ourselves: they won't listen - just like in the case of the more minor interaction with the FIDH regarding Homa Hoodfar's detention, they just won't listen. Now even less than in previous decades, given the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the USA and in the context of the Trump administration's attempts to promote versions of a "Muslim ban". While not-so well-intentioned groups continue to legitimize Islamists, we, the Democrats and the feminists from Muslim background, have been deleted.

P.S.

* This interview will be included in Andy Heintz's upcoming book *Dissidents of the International Left*.

* Andy Heintz is a freelance journalist who has been published in the Culture Project, Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres, Foreign Policy in Focus, Secularism is a Women's Issue, Balkan Witness and CounterVortex.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/25/gita-sahgal-amnesty-international> ; <http://www.firstpost.com/india/former-amnesty-international-gender-head-gita-sahgal-accuses-it-of-supporting-terror-groups-2960632.html>.
See: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/meredith-tax/double-bind-tied-up-in-knots-on-left> ; to order, see: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/meredith-tax/double-bind-the-muslim-right-the-anglo-american-left-and-universal-human-rights/paperback/product-20639503.html>