

Your fatwa does not apply here - Women resisting far right fundamentalisms

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Democratic and secular voices in Muslim majority countries have too often been sacrificed by the left in the west in the name of anti-imperialism and identity politics. The authoritarian movements of the far right, which democrats of the South oppose, must be recognized for what they are, Karima Bennouna tells Deniz Kandiyoti.

Deniz Kandiyoti: Your new book *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* [1] gives a voice to the victims of fundamentalist violence in Muslim majority countries. What led you to this project?

Karima Bennouna: The book was inspired by my father's experiences in Algeria in the 1990s when, as a progressive intellectual of Muslim heritage, he spoke out against rising Muslim fundamentalism in his own country and faced grave threats as a result [2]. He and Algerian democrats generally received little international solidarity, including from the left, during this terrible time. So I set out to meet people doing similar work today, to try to understand their analysis of the challenges they face, to try to give them more exposure and win them more support than their Algerian counterparts received in the 90s.

I interviewed nearly 300 people from almost 30 countries - from Afghanistan to Mali. They include teachers in northern Mali who risked everything to keep their co-educational schools open under Jihadist domination, women lawyers in Afghanistan who dared prosecute in cases of violence against women despite Taliban threats and U.S. attempts to "reconcile" with the Taliban, feminists in Egypt and Tunisia who participated in revolutions against autocrats and then fought [3] to stop those revolutions being hijacked by Islamists, or journalists in Chechnya who braved both Russian bombardment and the crimes of foreign fighters but continued to speak out. By portraying these lives in struggle and conveying these voices of conviction, I also hope to challenge stereotypical notions - whether on the left or on the right in the West - about the people we now simply call "Muslims".

DK: Your arguments clearly shift the focus of analysis from "a clash of civilizations" to a clash within civilizations, or as you put it, "a clash of right wings, not civilizations". How does this dynamic play out?

KB: I have been inspired in my thinking about these issues by the work of the anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada. She wrote the best book about the Danish cartoons controversy, called *Comment Produire une crise mondiale avec douze petit dessins* (How to produce a global crisis with twelve little drawings) [4]. In it, she speaks critically both about the politics of the Danish far right and the

Muslim far right. She is able to look at the problem through multiple lenses – that of discrimination against people of Muslim heritage, and that of Muslim fundamentalism simultaneously, thus better grasping the whole picture. That is what I am also trying to do. Reacting to the conflagration over the offensive pseudo-film *The Innocence of Muslims*, Favret-Saada wrote “On the one side we have cowardly networks of so-called defenders of the West who manufacture a provocation... and make terroristic use of freedom of expression, and on the other side Muslim fundamentalist commandoes... eagerly welcome this provocation... [E]ach needs the other to produce the desired effect... Together these militant groups cause considerable damage.”

DK: As a secular feminist of Algerian origin, you convey a sense of betrayal on the part of the liberal left in the West who, in their eagerness to denounce imperialism, armed interventions and the abuses unleashed by the so-called war on terror, have endorsed some Islamist tendencies with little discernment about their policies or record. How did we get here?

KB: There are many examples of this stance – whether it is the uncritical attitude of parts of the left and the human rights movement in Britain toward Moazzam Begg and Cage Prisoners that has been so strongly criticized by prominent South Asian feminists and others [5], or the pro bono representation of the interests of the late Anwar Awlaki and his family by the U.S. civil liberties group the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), with no effort to recognize Awlaki’s own record and his culpability in issuing threats of assassination (calling him simply “a Muslim cleric”), that has been opposed by Algerian survivors of terrorism [6] – and by myself when I sat on CCR’s Board.

How did we get here? There are a number of answers. The first has to do with the increasing hegemony of identity politics [7] and the assumption that this always represents a “progressive” stance. Yet identity politics covers over the fact that peoples of the Global South are as diverse as the rest of humanity, and are situated all across the political spectrum just like everyone else. Supporting the Muslim far right because they are Muslims still represents support for the far right. I was reminded again during the interviews for this book that one has to be uncompromising in challenging the far right wherever one lives – whether one is Muslim, Christian, Jewish or atheist.

Another irony is the reliance of some “post-colonial” scholars on a very colonial worldview –whereby there is one largely homogenous group of colonizers and a similarly homogenized group of colonized – and the only power dynamic that matters is that between those two groups. This is an oversimplification of today’s world where the dynamics are more complex, and in which there are multiple axes [8] along which power is exerted and dominance is asserted – multiple processes of subordination that resemble colonial domination. For example, women’s rights advocates I interviewed in Niger talked about Muslim fundamentalists’ attempts to “de-Africanize” their lived Islams, by imposing garments like the djilbab which are not indigenous to West Africa, a quasi-colonial intrusion. If we are committed to human rights and to equality, we have to take all these dynamics seriously. I refuse to be forced to choose between opposing colonialism and the burqa which are in fact about the same idea – subordination.

DK: Can you clarify your reluctance to accept at face value the distinctions the West has tried so hard to establish between so-called “moderate Islamists” (of the Ennahda and Muslim Brotherhood variety) and the jihadi manifestations of Islam? Where and how do you draw the lines?

KB: I do recognize distinctions among Islamist tendencies but have misgivings about the implications that have been ascribed to these distinctions in the West, and especially the way in which movements like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood have often been whitewashed in the process. At the end of the day, they are all right wing movements that uphold theocratic agendas of

varying stripes which they promote by diverse means.

What is fascinating to me is the attachment to the notion of “moderate Islamists” in the West, when, in many Muslim majority societies today, this is a highly contested notion. For example, after the recent assassination of Mohamed Brahmi in Tunisia, many of the articles reporting this event in the Western media used the phrase “moderate party” to describe Tunisia’s ruling party Ennahda, even though many on the ground were blaming Ennahda for the assassination, either directly or at least indirectly by fostering the climate that led to the killing [9]. One leading Ennahda deputy made an inflammatory speech saying that anyone who supported the removal of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt was a legitimate target – and Brahmi did praise what happened in Egypt before being felled by 14 bullets [10]. And yet this embrace of the “moderate Islamist” notion appeared in Western press articles on that same day.

I am trying to understand that attitude which, I think, comes from a number of different places. In official circles in the West a desire to use the Islamists politically to maintain order in the “Muslim world” (a term I do not use) while avoiding what is officially perceived as the only significant downside, namely, terrorism against “us,” seems to dictate the agenda. How “Islamists” wish to treat “their own people” is not their problem. Yet, in left and in liberal circles that would see themselves as critical of those official circles, you also sometimes find a similar embrace of this term, which I think again goes back to the previous question and an apology for Islamism in the name of a kind of thin cultural politics. Meanwhile, across North Africa you see a rejection of this notion of “moderate Islamism” not only in liberal and left political circles, but among ordinary people. There is a realization there of the fact that the minute your project is to use religion to take power or to rule you have crossed a line which takes you out of what we would ordinarily think of as “democracy” in the substantive sense.

The other thing I find disturbing is that the actual track record of the “moderate Islamists” gets entirely lost in the Western embrace of the notion. Almost no one in the West talks about the fact that you have Ennahda politicians openly threatening people who disagree with them, you have Ennahda female deputies calling for the gender segregation of public transportation. You have Ennahda tolerating an environment in which Salafist preachers are coming in and advocating female genital mutilation in a society where it has never been practiced [11]. Moreover, the so-called “moderates” open the door to the jihadis which is precisely what happened in Tunisia with Ennahda and the terror groups now operating in parts of the country, or in Egypt with Morsi’s nomination of Adel el-Khayat, a founding member of Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, to be governor of Luxor (when his own terror group was responsible for the worst attack in the city’s history) [12].

So what does “moderate” actually mean? On the ground, what people see is that the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda have attempted to use religion as a tool of governance and repression. A few days before I left Tunisia, I went to hear Mbarka Brahmi, Mohamed Brahmi’s widow, speak during a protest in front of the Constituent Assembly, calling for the Ennahda government to step down. She is a devout Muslim woman, and she said something very beautiful, *“We also say ‘Allahu Akbar.’ We also say ‘Mohamed Rasoul Allah.’ But we don’t say it to take power.”* She distinguished carefully between ordinary Muslims, and “merchants of religion.”

DK: Another interesting suggestion you make about the readiness with which voices like yours are dismissed and marginalized is that embracing “Muslim otherness” has become a convenient way for the West to absolve itself of the responsibility of its own actions. In fact you hold the policies of the West partly responsible for the rise of political Islam. Can you tell us more?

KB: Many progressive anti-fundamentalists of Muslim heritage today believe the U.S. supports

Muslim fundamentalism in many instances. Indeed, there is no question that the U.S. has sometimes fostered Muslim fundamentalist groups to suit its own geo-political agenda. During the 1980s in the context of the Cold War, the United States poured money and military aid into the Islamizing Pakistani dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq [13], and into Afghan mujahideen groups, no matter how extreme, as a way to counter communism. Disaffected men from many countries joined this U.S.-sponsored jihad in Afghanistan, then went home with their training and experience. This had a direct impact on countries like Algeria, where the worst jihadi killers were called “Afghans” for their battle experience in that faraway jihad.

The U.S. was not alone in this blunder. Britain supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the colonial period as a more palatable alternative to secular nationalists. As I was told by both Israelis and Palestinians I met, even Israel prefers Hamas to the secular Palestinian Authority and PLO. Fundamentalists are useful. They fulfill the stereotypes of Muslims, and can be counted on to keep “their own people” in line, usually causing great suffering to their compatriots in the process.

Meanwhile, anyone who dares to think critically about these issues and to speak from the perspective of a Muslim or Arab secularist, who dares to criticize Muslim fundamentalism and its relationship to the West, has to be disciplined. The fundamentalists themselves often engage in a very literal, physical discipline based on threats and actual violence. Some left intellectuals in the West use the violence of words by employing labels such as “imperialist feminism” to attack critical voices. However, deploying the epithet of imperialism as a slur simply displays a lack of understanding of the gravity of imperialism itself, and entirely obscures the fact that those of us trying to challenge the apology for Muslim fundamentalism in the West, including in the academy, are actually heeding the voices of progressive and feminist activists on the ground – whether in the Irhal Campaign in Tunisia [14], or in Djazairouna, the Algerian Association of Victims of Islamist Terrorism, who are themselves on the frontlines.

Personally, I find this line of attack rather remarkable given that I come from a family of peasants, two generations removed, that was very involved in the anti-colonial movement. My grandfather, one of the people to whom my book was dedicated, was killed by the French military. My father was imprisoned and tortured by the French authorities during the Algerian war of independence. I grew up with a very heavy sense of the responsibility of that legacy – which was to fight for the freedom and human rights of ordinary people in the region against any who would seek to trample them. That is why the dedication of my book to my grandfather Lakhdar Benboune, a peasant leader who organized massive protests against French domination and was repeatedly interned as a result, says that he “died defeating colonialism that his descendants might be free.” The fundamentalists, on the other hand, believe that those who died freeing Algeria were not real martyrs because they did not die fighting for an Islamic State.

DK: When you discuss the way forward for Muslim majority societies you state that upholding women’s human rights is a sine qua non about which there can be no compromise. What do you make of the contention that Muslim women must forge their own feminist discourse using the interpretative resources available to them in the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence? Where do you stand on these debates?

KB: The question facing women’s rights advocates is what strategy or strategies they should employ to be most effective today, in the face of fundamentalist movements and all the other challenges they face – patriarchy, racism, misogyny, autocracy, neo-liberalism run amok. I was compelled in my interview with the Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie-Lucas by her argument that right now the difficulties are so great [15], and the shared threat of fundamentalist movements so powerful, and we are so outgunned politically, that feminists who engage in feminist (re)interpretation of Islam and those who make secular human rights arguments, should be allies against fundamentalism. For me

as a committed secularist, it was a great honor to attend a Sisters in Islam event [16] in Kuala Lumpur in May this year on feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. I do believe our work can be complementary, and I am persuaded by the Tunisian feminist law professor Sana Ben Achour in her paper "Féminismes Laïcs en Pays d'Islam" [17] (Secular Feminism in Muslim Majority Countries) that we have to be careful of setting out a stark binary opposition between the two tendencies, each of which are diverse, and indeed in practice often porous – she gives the example of the work of Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité [18]. Nigerian feminist Ayesha Imam, for example, told me that she and her colleagues in Baobab for Women's Rights [19] used tools from whichever system can as she put it "recuperate rights", believing it is possible to arrive at similar conclusions by working through Muslim discourses or international human rights. "My issue" she underscores, "is not where you come from, but where you arrive at."

However, I do think that there are some potential dangers in applying what is called Islamic feminism in the current moment that have to be confronted. First of all, I think this discussion has to be very context specific. Though I am also a committed universalist, I do think one has to think strategically across contexts about how one raises issues. In some regions, sub-regions and countries, it may make sense to make arguments within religion, especially when confronting certain types of challenges. However, elsewhere, such as in northwest Africa where there was a pre-existing secular republican political tradition, where women already have (or perhaps now I should say had) formal equality in constitutions, engaging in religious argument when one is talking about social and political change – about women's participation in politics, about development, about health, may be a step backward onto theocratic terrain, and away from citizenship and universal human rights. For example, I asked the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow, who coordinates the network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws [20] whether secular or religious discourse on women's rights was more useful. She insisted that the best approach depends on context noting that "as a Senegalese I refuse to reinterpret the Qur'an to change the family law. I am not going to enter into the religious debate. I do not want to close myself off." She argues that the strategy for combating fundamentalisms must be a political one that takes the debate off "the religious terrain where they wish to trap us. Nowadays, all questions take you back to the Qur'an."

One of the most worrying trends is the embrace of Islamic feminism in the West as the only legitimate paradigm. There seems to be a desperate need in the West now for people in certain regions of the world to be simply "Muslims" – not citizens or human beings – what Iranian women's rights activist Mahnaz Afkhami [21] criticizes as "Islamic exceptionalism." Sana Ben Achour [22] recently asked in response to such ideas at play in Tunisia's constitutional drafting debate, "are there some human rights which we Tunisians do not deserve?"

Women's rights advocates and other progressive opponents of fundamentalism must act with urgency, and whatever their strategic choices, must find ways to work together now. If they do, they can have great political success at this particular moment. This, again, reminds me of the words of Mbarka Brahmi in front of the Constituent Assembly [23]: "The people will bring down the obscurantists, the murderers and the terrorists.... But we will sweep them away with civilized methods, not with their methods... with social movements, in every corner of Tunisia. And we will win, justice will win, Tunisia will win, a civil republic will win over the dark Tunisia that they wish for..."

* *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* is published on August 26th by W.W. Norton and Company

See also <http://www.karimabennoune.com/>

P.S.

* Open Democracy, 27 August 2013:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti-karima-bennoune/your-fatwa-does-not-apply-here>

Footnotes

[1] <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=4294972265>

[2] See on ESSF (article 29009), [Algeria twenty years on: words do not die](#).

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/14/is-this-the-end-of-the-arab-spring/democracy-activists-must-reclaim-a-co-opted-movement>

[4] <http://www.siawi.org/article81.html>

[5] <http://www.human-rights-for-all.org/spip.php?article15>

[6] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/15/us-assassination-policy-rights-awlaki>

[7] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>

[8] http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1626026

[9] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/26/world/middleeast/second-opposition-leader-killed-in-tunisia.html?_r=1&

[10] http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?temp=1&t=520&a=39354

[11] See on ESSF (article 29415), [Tunisia: Killing the Arab Spring in Its Cradle](#).

[12] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/luxor-protests-against-morsis-new-governor-for-the-city-former-islamist-terror-leader-adel-elkhayat-8662675.html>

[13] <http://www.amazon.com/Taliban-Militant-Fundamentalism-Central-Edition/dp/0300163681>

[14] <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/08/14/erhal-campaign-attempts-to-oust-enahdha-officials/>

[15] See on ESSF (article 30001), [Honour the dissenters](#).

[16] <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>

[17] <http://www.assuaal.net/content/البيان-الاجتماعي-للمجلس-الوطني-للمناهضة-للتطرف>

[18] <http://www.euromedrights.org/eng/category/countries/regional-members/collectif-95-maghre>

[b-egalite/](#)

[19] <http://www.escr-net.org/docs/i/399786>

[20] <http://www.wluml.org>

[21] <http://www.mahnazafkhami.net>

[22] http://www.fanoos.com/society/sana_ben_achour.html

[23] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/26/world/middleeast/second-opposition-leader-killed-in-tunisia.html?pagewanted=all>