

Grano Series – America in the Middle East

The 2nd annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the potential and limits of the use of American power in the Middle East and the prospects of democratization for the region.

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Islam's shattered pact with modernity

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The following is an edited transcript of Fouad Ajami's talk at the Grano Lecture. Ajami is the director of Middle Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University and an author of a number of books about the Arab world.

The real precursor to what is happening in Denmark today happened a generation ago, when Salman Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses*. The issues are exactly what we are witnessing today.

With *Satanic Verses*, the troubles began in Bradford, England. The book burning began in England. The activists who got hold of this issue and wanted to stay with it were in England. Ayatollah Khomeini, when he wrote his famous *fatwa*, came in on this issue a good month or two after. He happened onto it. He sensed its importance. He understood that this is really what you need to do, that this is a meaningful issue, and that if you are trying to walk away from the wreckage of the Iran/Iraq war and the defeat of Iran in this long war, if you want to give your revolutionary children, as he called them, something to think about, and if you want to situate Iran as the centre of the Islamic world, then why not turn to *The Satanic Verses*?

You would have expected European Islam to be more tolerant, but it was the other way around. The troubles migrated from England and made their way through the Islamic world, and we saw what happened.

In the case of these cartoons, this is exactly what happened. The Muslim activists in Denmark took their cause to the Islamic world. As they worked their way through the Islamic world, there was this exquisite little irony: They went into regimes that oppress Islamists, which kill Islamists, but which were more than willing to lend a helping hand, because such is what you have to do.

There is a great role played in this crisis by the Egyptian ambassador to Denmark. He became deeply engaged in this question. I find it ironic that the Egyptian regime, completely secular and completely merciless in its treatment of its own Islamists, suddenly offers tremendous support and finds that it has a lot of time and a lot of patience with the Danish activists and their concerns.

I think reasonable people can disagree about whether these cartoons are sensible or not, whether they are in good taste or not, but the issue — the question of freedom of expression — is vital. And I think what Europe is seeing in the case of the cartoons is its awakening to the danger within.

Fifteen million Muslims make their home in Europe; in fact the demography of Islam is the great story of the Islamic world today. Put side to side, the demography of Europe, the declining populations of Europe, 1.1 children per childbearing woman in Germany, or 1.2 in Spain, or 1.3 somewhere else, you can see the dilemma of Europe.

Europe is awakening to this danger. Europe has to understand that this is not a battle between America and the Islamic world, with Europe as an innocent bystander. Europe is a battleground in this fight.

Every European country has had its moment of awakening. In the case of the Danes, this is their moment.

The July 7 bombings were England's. Kids who worked in a fish and chips restaurant — how more British could you be — were involved in deeds of terror. That was the moment of truth for Britain.

Look at what has happened, as well, in the case of the Dutch. Here is the quintessentially politically correct society. It awakens to the horror with the murder of the filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, when a young Dutchman of Moroccan descent walks up and kills Van Gogh and then sticks a knife in him and leaves a message on him.

During his trial the killer said he had no remorse. He said, "I slaughtered him" — the language again coming from some other deep tradition and some other frightening world.

So I think, in the case of these cartoons, they are a window into what is happening in the Islamic world, and what is happening in Europe in particular.

If you want to live in a liberal society, you have to be willing to be offended. And these people are not willing to be offended. They don't

understand the nature of life in a modern society. They are in the West, as I always have said about them, but they are not of the West.

I feel like a total dinosaur. My generation of Arabs and Muslims, when we left we understood the meaning of our departure. We understood that we were leaving the failing lands of the Arab world. We understood that we couldn't take our beliefs on the road with us to foreign lands. We knew that we had to adjust.

And even as we came out of darkness, we could see the lodestar. The lodestar was modernity; you just follow that path toward the modern world.

That pact with modernity has been shattered in the Islamic world today. And people ask, "Well, what does one see for the future of the Islamic world?"

I really don't know. You are dealing with a world all the way from Indonesia and the east to Morocco in the west, 1.2 billion people; 20 per cent of the world's population are Muslims. What can we say about them? They are an enormous variety. What can you say about a religion that has the Malays and the Saudis?

Not much, on some level. But you could make some generalizations. You can say, by and large, this population tends to be overwhelmingly young. They are urban. They are poor. And it's not so much they are illiterate — they are half educated. They are newly lettered. They now have access to the Koran, direct access to the text. They are literalists.

They read the text. And from the text, they can pronounce on the modern world. They can pronounce on politics. They can pronounce on my faith and yours. They can pronounce on the condition of women. They can decide for themselves and for their neighbours, and for the government.

That dilemma for the Islamic world will endure. These cartoons are just a window on the unease of modern Islam — on the inability of modern Muslims to live in their own lands, where they can't really make a living, but then when they take the faith abroad and try to manipulate it, they find themselves unable to live with others, and unable to accept the rules of the modern life. You are going to see more Salman Rushdie affairs. You are going to see more of these cartoons.

The city I grew up in, Beirut, has played a part. We watched the attack on the Danish consulate in Beirut. The people who assaulted the consulate

came into a Christian area of Beirut, a city that is divided in the old-fashioned Ottoman way. There are Christian neighbourhoods and Muslim neighbourhoods. And the Lebanese know better than to go into a neighbourhood that is not their own. They know the rules of the road. But nevertheless, they stormed this consulate and they attacked a Mennonite church in east Beirut.

When the police rounded up some of these suspects, we learned something about them. The largest number of people who were rounded up were Syrians. The second largest were Palestinians. And the third, finally, bringing up the rear, were the Lebanese themselves.

Now, the Syrian regime orchestrating all this is hardly a pious regime, right? They themselves have had a terrible war with the Islamists in their midst. In 1982, the ruler, the father of this young ruler today, Assad himself, gunned down no fewer than 20,000 people in the city of Hama, and they were principally Sunni Muslims. They were Muslim brothers who had risen against the "godless" regime of Assad.

So the spectacle of a tyrannical Syrian regime — secular, really considered by the pious to be an un-Islamic, ungodly regime — suddenly awakening to this great violation that befell the Islamic world is a scam. It's a scam, and people know that it's a scam.

Fortunately, there are now people who are awakening to the fact that they are fouling their own nest, that they are destroying their own world. And there are Islamic jurists of some moral calibre, and some substance, and some spine, who are trying to recover the tradition and trying to take Islam back from these hooligans.

You can at least draw some measure of hope that the battle is joined, and that maybe some Muslims will reclaim their tradition.

They have to take it back from the likes of bin Laden. They have to take it back from the likes of these preachers in Denmark. They have to take it back from the preachers in London.

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