VIEWPOINT

ISLAM, TERRORISM AND THE WEST TODAY

BY

SADIK J. AL-AZM

Damascus

I. Personal

I was in Sendai, Japan as a visiting professor at Tohoku University when the September 11, 2001 airborne assaults on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon fortress in Washington DC occurred. I happened to be watching television when the stunning image of the smoking first tower flashed on the screen. As soon as I assured myself that this was neither the science fiction channel nor some mega Hollywood urban fear and panic movie on display and that what I saw was for real this time, I could not help experiencing a strong emotion of Schadenfreude that I tried to contain, control and hide. This primitive emotion took hold of me in spite of the strong injunction in Arabo-Islamic culture forbidding Schadenfreude (shamâta in Arabic) when it comes to death, even if it happens to be the violent and deserved death of your mortal enemies. At that moment, I intuitively knew, as well, that millions and millions of people experienced the same emotion throughout the Arab World and beyond.

As the macabre drama of the two towers unfolded and as I regained myself and my composure two ideas and a question spontaneously flashed in my mind: The first said our Islamists did it, because they have a deep-seated vendetta against the World Trade Center, as they had tried to blow it up in 1993, but failed. And as is predictable with Arab and Middle Eastern vendettas, the aggrieved party revisited the site with a far huger vengeance than ever, to settle accounts and even the score.

From that moment on, I never had any doubts about who perpetrated that all-destroying act and who committed that heinous crime. For, as an Arab I knew something about the power of such motives in our culture and their ability at times to engulf all behavior and color all outlooks to the detriment of all other considerations. To appreciate this matter all one needs is a quick look at the endless acts of deadly retaliations and counter-retaliation unfoldings in Palestine and Israel since the start of the second Intifada.

The second idea said the United States will be out in full force to crush the Islamist movement world-wide into oblivion; while the question asked...
why the *Schadenfreude* on my part? Why this unworthy and reprehensible emotion of taking delight — even if awkwardly, shyly and self-consciously — in such a massacre of the innocents?

Various answers crowded in on me: the news from Palestine had been particularly bad for the last few days. The sneaky satisfaction of seeing the arrogance of power abruptly humbled, even if temporarily. The sight of the *jihadi* frankensteins that the United States had so carefully reared, nourished and used suddenly turning their deadly skills against their masters, handlers and manipulators. Certainly, one legitimate occasion for such gleeing and gloating in my culture is the moment when ‘the black magic finally turns against the magician’ as we say in Arabic. The very dramatic exposure of the cynicism and hypocrisy inherent in Ronald Reagan once hailing the Taliban-types invited to the White House not too long ago, as “the moral equivalent of America’s founding fathers”. The natural resentment of the weak and marginalized at the peripheries of empires against the Center and in this case against such a self-righteous and vainglorious Center of the Center.

Startled Japanese colleagues and friends were naturally at a loss as to what to make of the whole situation. For example, they saw television images of a lot of Palestinians — including little boys and girls — jubilantly celebrating the September 11 attacks, exchanging personal congratulations in public, distributing sweets in the streets as if it was feast-time. They also heard official Palestinian denials and dismissals of these festivities as the acts of uncomprehending innocent little children and saw Yaser Arafat extending his deepest condolences to the American people and government while donating some of his blood — under the glare of the television cameras — to the victims in New York.

I quite honestly explained to the puzzled Japanese colleagues and friends that the simple Palestinians and uncomprehending children celebrating in the streets, genuinely expressed and reflected the spontaneous feelings and sincere emotions of masses of people throughout the Arab World; and that Arafat’s denials, condolences and gestures represented the hypocrisy of the politics of the moment in its purest form. To emphasize my point, I explained also that it would be very hard these days to find an Arab, no matter how sober, cultured, and sophisticated, in whose heart there is not some room for *Schadenfreude* after what happened to the Americans on September 11, 2001.

Is this then Huntington’s clash of civilizations come true and so quickly? Well, the Japanese with whom I was interacting figured out the matter somewhat differently. The whole affair seemed to them at the time like a religious war resurrected from some long gone dark ages where Islamic *jihād* perpetrates a sensational act of terroristic violence without precedent against the heart of the west; and where the President of the United States acts immediately to mobilize the Christian World for a ferocious counter-crusade against Islam. No wonder, then, that a cultured Japanese lady whispered to my wife, “what kind of savage religions do you have on