

# Calling All Muslims: It's Time for an Anti-imperialist Secular Awareness

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*Given that June 20 is World Refugee Day I want to take the opportunity to share some observations and opinions that may ruffle some feathers, but urgently need to be stated, especially by Muslim immigrants in the west.* <sup>[1]</sup>

## Part I. An Encounter With a Syrian Refugee

The other day I met a Syrian refugee family that had recently come to Canada. They moved next door to some friends of mine and I said hello to them in Arabic when I saw them sitting on the porch. The wife, a bubbly hijabi woman named Amira who is around my age, was overjoyed to meet someone that spoke Arabic and quickly struck up a conversation with me.

In a matter of minutes I learned that the family had left their small Syrian village three years ago for neighbouring Lebanon and lived there till they were approved to come to Canada as refugees, just three months ago. I also quickly learned that Amira and her husband, like many Syrian refugees, are ardent haters of **Bashar Al Assad** and critics of secular culture. Amira told me (in Arabic) that, while it was hard for her to leave her family back home, it may be fate that they ended up in Canada so that they can “spread the Muslim faith.” Uh oh...

To a *secular* Muslim—or, more appropriately, someone that can be described as culturally Muslim, since I was raised by Muslim parents in a Muslim immigrant household but do not practice religion—this set off some alarm bells. This woman left a secular Muslim country—yes, for all the supposed concern over radical Islam, the west is currently trying to destroy a *secular* Muslim country, with a very open and tolerant mixed society—for asylum in a western secular country and hopes to spread her religious beliefs *here*? Is that what we're dealing with, Muslim *missionaries*? Amira seemed excited about the prospects of spreading the faith and told me that she felt Canadians were far more accepting of Muslims, and receptive to Islam, than Christian Arabs in Lebanon. She also offered to give me “religious advice” in exchange for English lessons in the future.



Source: Hijab Style

While Canada is a multi-cultural country that prides itself on religious tolerance and diversity, as a secular or non-religious person, I should *also* be tolerated and respected, and not subjected to religious peer pressure or attempts to make me “more religious.” During my conversation with the newly arrived Amira, I was asked why I do not wear the hijab (Muslim headscarf), if I practice Ramadan fasting and if my husband was a Muslim. While she was very friendly about it, the conversation quickly digressed into a religious guilt trip and interrogation. This is something I have experienced many times from “deeply religious” and rather prying Muslims that are “concerned for my soul” for one reason or another. As she talked, I could see her looking me up and down with a judging smirk, as if to evaluate my holiness, or lack there of.

I do not tolerate religious sermons from my own family members, even when I am visiting family over seas. And I should not have to experience it from a complete stranger that has been here for mere months, and is my age if not younger. Now before any apolitical liberals or fake lefties—who fail to see the connections between certain segments of the Syrian refugee population and western sponsored political Islam and Wahhabism—accuse me of being Islamophobic let me remind you that a) I am Muslim and b) I would not tolerate religious lecturing or “shaming” from someone of any *other* faith as well.

While some might assume that Amira felt comfortable lecturing me in this way because I am Arab and Muslim, and, that she likely would not submit non-Arabs and non- Muslims to the same pressure and religious guilt trip, let me remind you that she specifically told me that she believes that she was destined to end up in Canada so that she “can spread the faith.” While all Syrian refugees probably do not think this, the fact that even some do, is worrisome in a *secular* country such as Canada. Practicing one’s faith is one thing, pushing it on others is another thing altogether. While non-Arab or non-Muslim Canadians may be too afraid or polite to say this, I believe that I have a responsibility to say it as a secular Muslim.

And so do other secular, non-religious, cultural or “moderate” Muslims. We have a responsibility to speak out against the radicalization that is occurring in the Arab and Muslim world—which has been largely sponsored by the imperial west and its allies in the region like Israel and Saudi Arabia—and the ease with which overly religious people are able to encroach on the public and private lives and views of non-religious or secular types. <sup>[2]</sup> I should note that I do not like the word (or prefix) “moderate” because it implies that the majority of Muslims are non-moderate or fanatical. While Muslim radicalization has indeed

increased and while Arab secularism has practically vanished—phenomena driven partly by the imperial geopolitical aims and objectives of certain states—not all Muslims are fanatical, radical or even practicing, for that matter.

And those Muslims that are secular, “moderate” or wary of religious radicalization have a responsibility to speak out against it. More importantly, we must speak out about the **causes** of this radicalization. Part two of this article explores some of those causes.

## **Part II. The End of Arab Secularism and the Rise of Radicalization**

In order to understand the increase in outward religiosity and religious radicalization that has been occurring in the Arab/Muslim world for decades, a critical and historical understanding of geopolitics and western imperialism/Empire is necessary. Without it, we are simply criticizing the *symptoms* of a much deeper and extremely nuanced problem. Western imperialism is not the only radicalizing factor in the region. There are other internal factors at play, which may or may not be linked to western imperialism. For the purposes of this article I focus mainly on the former.

As I have noted elsewhere, the Muslim/Arab World was once secular and “modern.” It is well known that “from the 1950s to perhaps even the 1980s, the strongest political trends in the Arab world were secular.”<sup>[3]</sup> This trend shifted for several reasons; a major one being that the west—and the US in particular—started to pursue a full fledged agenda to radicalize Muslims, aligning and allying itself with Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism, which is a Saudi interpretation of Islam; and a very fundamentalist and archaic one.

Before Saudi Arabia and the US fully joined forces in radicalizing the region, there was the bygone era of Arab secularism. “That world can be glimpsed in old newsreels from the Arab cities of the 1950s and 1960s. The cities of the post-war period - Cairo, Beirut and Damascus, Baghdad and Aden - look much the same as many developing countries of the time: American-built cars, European-style suits, a certain easy mingling of men and women.”<sup>[ibid.]</sup> It was also the era of the secular pan-Arab Egyptian leader **Gamal Abdel Nasser**. Nasserism and secular pan-Arabism are *far* too broad and nuanced a topic to cover here.

For now, I simply want to point out that Nasser’s attitude towards political Islam and Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood reflects much of the public Arab sentiment around religion at that time: That religion and religious practice is a *personal* matter than cannot and should not be dictated publicly.

A well-known antidote that demonstrates this point comes from a speech given by Gamel Abdel Nasser in the years after the Muslim Brotherhood was suspected of attempting to assassinate him. In that speech, which is available online, Nasser recounts a meeting with the Brotherhood’s leader in 1953 wherein he asked Abdel Nasser to make the wearing of the hijab or tarha (as Egyptians call it) mandatory in Egypt. Nasser tells the crowd that he told the MB leader that wearing the hijab is a personal matter and choice. Nasser also tells the Muslim Brotherhood leader that he knows that he has a daughter studying medicine, and *she* doesn’t wear the hijab:

“Why haven’t you made her wear the hijab?”

Nasser asks, before delivering a now famous punchline:

“If you cannot make one girl – who is your own daughter – wear the hijab...how do you expect me to make 10 million women wear the hijab, all by myself?”

The crowd roars and laughs in approval.

As **Faisal Al Yafai** explains, Nasser’s joke reflects the worldview of Egyptians, especially educated middle and upper class Egyptians, back in the 1950s:

“that it was ridiculous that the wearing of the hijab could be enshrined in law.”

As Yaifa explains, Egyptians

“...considered the proper role of religion to be private, outside the realm of government and politics. Nasser himself explicitly declared the same thing.”

He continues,

“Contrast that with today’s Egypt, and indeed the wider Arab world, and it is clear how much has changed in just half a century” <sup>[Ibid.]</sup>

Yafai maintains that Nasser’s punchline—millions of women wearing the hijab—has become Egypt’s reality and that secularism as a worldview has disappeared in the Arab world. Yafai explores only the internal or Arab causes for this change, failing to even mention western meddling and external influences. Still, he is correct that the once secular Arab and Muslim world has changed tremendously in the last half century. In my opinion, it is a change for the worse.

I am *not* criticizing Arab/Muslim people for wearing the hijab, far from it. I have the utmost respect and tolerance for people’s religious beliefs and practices. I simply want to demonstrate that once upon a time in the Arab/Muslim world, religion was rightly a *personal* matter and practice, rather than a *public* expression and pressure. When I hear Syrian refugees like the friendly and chatty Amira tell me that she feels that it is her destiny to spread the Islamic religion in Canada, I interpret that as a *public mission* rather than a matter of personal religious observance. To me, that is alarming; and it reflects the de-secularization and Islamic radicalization occurring in the Arab world.

### ***The West’s Connection to Islamic Radicalization***

The forces of Islamic radicalization are very nuanced and complex. The motives for radicalizing the Arab world are also nuanced and complex. A large part of the motivation is controlling Mid East oil and the oil trade. Much of the radicalization efforts came after the formation of OPEC and the Saudi-US oil alliance, which forced the world to use the US dollar to purchase oil while also securing the pre-eminence of Saudi Arabia and its promotion of Wahhabi, extremist Sunni Islam throughout the region.

Wahhabism is a strict orthodox Sunni Muslim sect founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92). It advocates a return to the *early Islam* of the Koran, rejecting later innovations; the sect is still the predominant religious force in Saudi Arabia. The phrase “rejecting later innovations” implies that there *were* innovations to the orthodox or literal interpretation of Islam and that Muslims were modernizing or becoming less literal in their practice, like most people do with time. While Wahabbism was the predominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, it had not deeply impacted (and infected) the rest of the Muslim world. This is evidenced by the reality—which I spoke of earlier—that the political and public sentiment of the Arab world was largely secular till the early late 1970s and early 1980s.



Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of Wahhabism (Source: Adonis Diaries)

While there are internal factors that contributed to the death of secularism and the rise of a more literal, orthodox and archaic form of religiosity, there is a big external factor that cannot be overlooked: the massive oil alliance that was formed between the **United States** and Saudi Arabia after the oil embargo of 1973 (that occurred due to conflicts with Israel). This is when Saudi Arabia buried the hatchet with Israel and the US, and became oil partners and staunch political allies. In exchange for Saudi Arabia only accepting US dollars for oil, giving the US and its currency global economic hegemony, the US allowed and (indirectly) helped the Saudis to spread Wahhabism and radical Sunni Islam (and terrorism) across the Middle East.

Strategically, both the US and Israel benefit from the rise of radical Islam. For Israel, having “radical neighbours” in the region helps legitimize its illegal occupation and actions towards the Palestinians. It also ensures that the Muslims and Arabs will be busy fighting among themselves over sectarian religious issues and conflicts between Sunnis and Shias. The US also benefits from these internal divisions and conflicts. The exploitation and *exacerbation* of divisions between Sunnis and Shias—the two main Muslim sects—goes a long way towards servicing the imperial agenda of divide and conquer. Moreover, the existence of terrorist groups—that are often created and or aided by the US—allows the US to justify its global war on terror and the billions spent on it.

For the US, the rise of Islamic radicalism and terrorist groups allows these groups to be deployed against *secular* Muslim countries and leaders that do not play ball with the US and do not accommodate its interests (e.g., Iraq, Libya, Syria). While it has cozied up to and allied with fundamentalist states like Saudi Arabia, the US has simultaneously pursued an agenda of attacking and destabilizing *secular* Muslim countries and leaders that do not bend to its imperialist demands and agenda (i.e., put their own national interests before that of the US’). These include Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, Libya’s **Muammar Gaddafi** and, presently, Syria’s **Bashar Al Assad**. But the attack on secular Muslim leaders began even earlier with the joint US-UK 1952 coup against secular Iranian president **Mohammed Mossadegh**, for instance. He had committed the sin of nationalizing his countries oil and attempting to reclaim it from the UK.

### ***Undermining Russia***

Another US motivation for radicalizing Muslims was to undermine communism and the Soviet Union. The US has been arming and backing Islamist radicals and terrorist groups for

decades, especially in its efforts to undermine the influence of Russia in the region. As the US [admitted](#) in the 1990s, American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahideen—presently known as the Taliban—in Afghanistan 6 months before the Soviet-Afghan war began in 1979, suggesting that the terrorist group was partly a creation of the US (in collaboration with countries like Pakistan). Ultimately, promoting Islamic extremism and terrorism was one western response to the so-called communist threat (read as the threat to NATO and US power) posed by the Soviet Union. <sup>[4]</sup>

The same is true today of the US' indirect support of terrorist groups like ISIS in Syria. As I argue elsewhere,

“an obvious yet unspoken component of the US/NATO campaign in Syria, as well as their efforts in Ukraine, and the so-called Missile Defense Shield in Europe, is to undermine Russia’s ability to not only project power but also to defend itself strategically. These are examples of the West’s attempts to militarily and economically contain Russia.” <sup>[ibid.]</sup>

This is something secular anti-imperial Muslims should oppose, not least because Russian and Soviet influence in the region has been a secularizing force (or one that reinforced the already secular politics of post-war Arab countries). Arab countries aligned with Russia after WWII and during the Cold War (and even those that were officially non-aligned) tended towards notions of secularism, anti-foreign interference, and, with the rise of the Soviet Union, socialism. But Arab secularism was not a by-product of Russian influence alone; it is a truly Arab tradition.

“The secular conception of the state that animated both nationalist and pan-Arabist politics was widespread in political life.”

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, there was a deep degree “of popular attachment to a secular state among the political class.” Indeed, “with the exception of Saudi Arabia, no country of the Arab world, from Sudan and Yemen, to Iraq, to Algeria in the Maghreb, was without its secular, nationalist parties.” [5]

But since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia, bolstered by its relations and alliance with the US, has been able to promote Wahabbism in the region. Saudi Arabia has spent millions and billions of dollars propping up and arming Islamist movements and groups in the Arab world; while other Gulf countries, such as (former) Saudi ally Qatar, have been bolstering media outlets that are sympathetic disseminators of extremism and political Islam. These heavily funded entities have been able to influence the culture and population of various Arab/Muslim countries, guiding them even further away from secularism and towards greater and more regressive religiosity.

### ***Western Intervention/Destabilization and Migration Patterns***

Alongside all of the above there have been decades of foreign intervention, destabilization, and war making in Arab and Muslim world by western powers. One result of this policy of war and destabilization in the region has been the dramatic increase and influx in immigrants and, especially, refugees from the region. Simply put, the west is “forced” to take refugees and immigrants from countries that they create conflicts and destabilization

in, in the first place. If we look at the trends in migration by Muslim people to Europe and North America over the last 30 years, a pattern emerges. Many, if not most, Muslim refugees and immigrants have come from countries that NATO and the US have invaded, attacked, destabilized, regime changed or all of the above.

These include countries like Somalia and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s; Iraq and Sudan in early to mid 2000s; and more recently, Libya and Syria. All of these countries have suffered from western meddling and destabilization efforts, which have included the support and propping up of radical Islamist or Salafi regimes. And many of those that fled and are currently fleeing to the west as migrants and refugees are people that may be hostile to the pre-invasion (often secular) governments and may indeed support a very radical or extremist Islamic ideology and practice. This is something we must take into consideration when exploring whether certain migrants and refugees are compatible with secular western culture. This is *not* Islamophobia. I say this as a secular Muslim immigrant in the west that is well aware that political Islam/Islamism is an Empire serving form of religiosity that may not be compatible with secular society and culture; be it Western or Middle Eastern.

### ***Final Thoughts***

One can only hope that as certain secular and/or non-Islamist countries such as Syria (with the help of the Russian military) and Egypt continue to resist and withstand the US-Saudi-Israeli sponsored Islamist offensive against them, and as other countries in the region—such as the duplicitous Turkey and the recently changed Qatar—move away from the western-Islamist alliance/agenda and cozy up to Russia, that political Islam will fade, leading to a much needed de-radicalization and re-secularization of the region. But it will be an uphill battle, since the forces of radicalization are strongly and deeply rooted.

The great irony in all of this is that while the west, and the US in particular, claims to be at war with Islamic terrorism and radical Islam, it is actually directly and indirectly in bed with it. Directly, the US is a major ally and financial beneficiary to and of Saudi Arabia, which has a radical and extremist interpretation and practice of Islam. Indirectly, the US sells weapons to Saudi Arabia and others—that turn around and arm terrorist groups in the region. It also provides clandestine support for various terrorist groups in the region. Such is the case with ISIS in Syria, a “conflict” that is mainly fueled by western interests and the west’s incessant “meddling” in the region.

US support for terrorism (including against the Syrian government) has been noted by numerous independent news media as well as by US congress members, such as former **Rep. Cynthia McKinney** and current **Rep. Tulsi Gabbard**. When Rep. Gabbard visited Syria in 2016 she reported that the US was giving support to terrorist groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda and others. <sup>[6]</sup> It is important to note that most if not all of these murderous terrorist groups claim to be Islamist and deeply religious. Now, of course, no one that commits such horrific acts as these groups do—such as the brutal beheading of a young boy by the US-backed “moderate” terrorist group Nour al-Din Zenky in Syria last year—can be said to be truly holy or god fearing. But the fact that these terrorist groups operate under the banner of political Islam and extremist religious ideology, is reason enough to be wary of political Islam or any form of political (and public) religiosity.

Many—but certainly not all—of the Syrians that fled the country and are now living in Canada and Europe, as refugees, are *sympathetic* to the radical religious ideology of these lunatic groups. If you are Arab and/or Muslim it is pretty easy to suss out if a person is pro-

Wahhabi/Salafi Islam—which is a very extremist and archaic interpretation of Islam—in just a few conversations, since politics and religion invariably come up in conversations with people from the region. Such was the case with my aforementioned conversation. As a secular person living in a secular country I get nervous about extreme forms of public religiosity by people of *any* faith.

Another strange irony is the undiscerning support for religious extremists—including refugees <sup>[7]</sup> —by so-called progressives. Many of these progressives do not see a contradiction or tension in supporting things like women’s rights and gay rights while simultaneously fighting for the human rights of certain extremely religious Muslim refugees or migrants, whose *orthodox* religious views would potentially see them ideologically pitted against women’s rights or gay rights. Lacking nuanced ideological discernment and anti-imperial analysis, so-called progressives’ blanket and apolitical defense of “human rights” does not allow them to see how their genuine concern could be co-opted or exploited for imperial ends. In Egypt and the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s it was the educated middle class that supported secularism and rejected religious dogma and orthodoxy. Today, ironically, in *the west*, it is the educated middle class—especially the young identity politics “left” and campus “social justice warriors”—that are advocating and demanding the unequivocal tolerance of, and support for, even the most extreme forms of public religious expression, in a non-religious (i.e., secular) society.

Secular Western states are presently scurrying to accommodate refugees that could potentially have religious extremists, or individuals that are intolerant of secular culture, among them. <sup>[ibid]</sup> There is a two-fold irony in this current refugee crisis a) The west created or helped to create the conflicts in the refugees’ home countries in the first place; meaning it helped create the conditions of displacement and b) The west contributed to radicalization in these countries, which may now affect western states as blowback.

I wish to close by stating that there is a *marked* difference between my critique of radical Muslims and refugees and those that come from racist and Islamophobic sources. In addition to being bigoted, the latter are often also pro-Empire and pro war. On the contrary, mine is an anti-imperialist and anti-war perspective that identifies the dangers of and collaborations between radical Islam, political Islam, and western imperialism.

To all those Muslims that share my position and analysis, it is important to speak up and call for a return to secularism in the Arab/Muslim world; a return to a politics and society that does not promote and exploit religious sectarianism and religious extremism in the service of Empire.

## Notes

[1] My Parents immigrated to North America from the MENA region when I was just two years of age.

[2] Everyone is free to believe and practice their faith, and to whatever extent they wish. I simply want to stress that people do not have the right to pressure, guilt or shame those that may not believe or practice the same thing (or to the same extent), and vice versa.

[3] <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/the-death-of-arab-secularism#page5>

[4]

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/on-syrias-continued-resistance-russia-and-the-threat-to-western-power/55>



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[5] <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/the-death-of-arab-secularism#page5>

[6] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/syria-why-is-the-us-helping-al-qaeda-and-other-terrorist-groups-rep-tulsi-gabbard/5571358>

[7] It goes without saying that this is not referring to *all* Syrian refugees. Most refugees coming from Syria are likely not religiously extreme. There are also many secular (Muslim and Christian) refugees.

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