

Prejudice Two Ways. Islamophobia Breeds Paranoia

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The large mall at its busiest. Everyone is running around, picking up last-minute gifts. Christmas carols rang through the air, but hardly anyone listened. I watched the shopping frenzy from afar while drinking coffee.

A few days ago a man had ploughed a truck into a crowded market in Berlin, murdering twelve and injuring much more. German investigators believe the perpetrator is an ISIS allegiant from Tunisia. I scrolled through the latest updates on the carnage on my mobile phone, and took another sip from my cup. ... What if another ISIS allegiant was about to detonate himself and blow this place up? The number of potential fatalities sent shivers down my spine. I scanned the surrounding area for possible suspects.

It's quite warm in here, why is that man over there wearing a puffer jacket? I gasped when he turned around. He had a long beard, and looked Indian. No, he's probably from Afghanistan. *An al Qaeda operative?* ... Oh my God! He's pulling something out. That's it, we're finished! Should I take cover under the table? The man sneezed, rubbed his red nose with his handkerchief and put it back in his pocket, obviously struggling with a bad cold, or maybe hay fever. Just like me.

I felt a twinge of guilt, but then caught a glimpse of a short lady in a black burka, eyes barely visible. What's in that huge stroller she's pushing? Why is she hurrying? She looks confused. Who's she waving her hand at? *An accomplice?* Are they signaling zero-hour? Is a machine gun going to come out of that loose garment to shoot everyone down? A little girl came running and clung to the shrouded woman, clasping her arms around what seemed like a waist. A tiny hand from the stroller stretched upwards too.

Enough with this Paranoia! But, why am I excluding Caucasians? ISIS has been recruiting them to fight in the Middle East as well, hasn't it? What about that pale-faced girl with the nose piercing? Maybe she's a junkie who's willing to do anything to get her fix. And that tattooed young man, he looks stoned too. In the middle of my scrutiny, I came across my reflected image in the opposite mirrored wall. ... I stared into my sad eyes and serious face for a while, and the reality hit me: *Why not you?*

What? Me? Just because I have Arab features, doesn't mean I'm a prospective killer. I'm an advocate for secularism, women's and minorities' rights, and have written extensively against the tyranny of the clergy. Also, I stopped practicing Islam a long time ago; how can I be a terrorist? ... *Nonsense!* What difference do my beliefs make? They don't show on my forehead. Even if they did, what significance do they have in the split-second decisions people make when facing a lurking disaster?

I grabbed a newspaper to distract myself from disturbing thoughts. An Arab-American was booted off his flight for no other reason than speaking in his mother tongue, one of the

headlines read. *Unfair!* Those Westerners are punishing us—victims of terrorism, for the monster their politicians and strategists had created and enhanced over the past decades. I should write about that.

But, who—in this shamelessly visual age, would bother to read an analysis of the Muslim world’s modern history, when ISIS is swamping the social media with ghastly short videos, whose impact on their viewers is often irrevocable? What’s the point, and what can my apologetic writings change if the Pandora’s Box has been opened and is indiscriminately spreading poison. No time for blame or alibis! People are running for their lives, and many are doomed to get crushed in the stampede.

Disconcerting gazes of the other patrons followed me as I walked out of the coffee shop. A burning sensation washed over my body, as if stung by a swarm of bees. I took a moment to breathe and reflect: *This is not likely to change anytime soon, and since there isn’t much for me to do, I might as well get used to living with it.* ... The recent controversy surrounding the travel ban to the United States from several Muslim-majority countries reminded me of my pre-Christmas fright and rekindled my confusion.

President Trump’s executive order didn’t come as a surprise to millions of Iraqis who have been suffering humiliation and rejection at world airports and embassies since Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. It did raise questions though about the validity of such measures when the Middle East is bristling with American schools, universities, military bases, financial institutions and other companies.

Terrorists nowadays don’t need to travel all the way to the United States to attack American interests and individuals, they have them right there in their own backyard. But does the ban at least guarantee the safety of American citizens inside their borders? I don’t think so. ... Less than three weeks after Berlin’s Breitscheidplatz attack; a gunman went on a shooting rampage at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, killing five passengers and wounding several others. The twenty-six-year-old suspect is an army veteran of white Hispanic descent, the media reported. He’s neither Arab nor Muslim.

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