

Combating Terrorism through an Education for Democratic Iteration

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Abstract

In this article, we argue analytically that democratic iteration is a plausible discourse to mitigate terrorism in the contemporary world. By far the most pertinent position we advance is the need for democratic iteration among people who perpetrate acts of violence and those subjected to the perpetration of such acts. An education for freedom from terror is justifiable in the sense that such a view of education would cultivate intercultural understanding and uncompromising attitudes toward people's beliefs and values – that is, the possibility for critical attitudes and social change would be enhanced. The afore-mentioned form of education (in Islam) is emancipatory and would hopefully instill in people the willingness and openness to engage in interculturalism, to appreciate the possibility of changing the world by seeing and thinking about things differently (including terrorism).

We contend that terrorism is a form of political violence that has not necessarily been caused by education; rather, it is caused by the uncertainty, hopelessness, and instability that lead to human deprivation, exclusion, dystopia in the world and, ultimately, out-

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rage. Yet we posit that an education in Islam about experiencing the other (as opposed to knowingness) through deliberative iteration would serve as a meaningful mitigation of terror.

Introduction

The concept of terrorism seems to have endured intense and sustained attention in the media since the catastrophic events of 9/11 and the subsequent “global war on terror” pioneered by former president George W. Bush. Of course terrorism is a form of political violence that everyone would probably agree with as being undesirable. We concur that terrorism is a scourge upon society and that people who commit terrorist acts “are often brutal and psychotic, on the fringes of society, engaged in criminal activities, or powerfully driven ideological zealots.”¹ However, what seems to be somewhat disconcerting is that terrorism has been used synonymously and erroneously with jihad, which is mostly defined as a “holy war” perpetrated by those associated with Islam.

In this article, we argue the following points: (1) terrorism cannot parochially be associated with jihad and acts perpetrated solely by Muslims; (2) (Islamic) education cannot exclusively be considered as the rationale that guides terrorism, but that the attendant forms of humiliation and deprivation that some people might encounter cause them to act with rage toward others while concomitantly drawing on religious authentications to justify their violent actions; and (3) that democratic iteration seems to be a viable practice that ought to inspire people to counteract terrorism. In this way, education as democratic iteration might begin to reduce the dystopias associated with terrorism.

What Constitutes Terrorism?

In 2004 the United States Department of Defense (DOD) offered the following definition of terrorism: “The calculated use of *unlawful violence* [not sanctioned by government] or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of the goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.”² In fact, the DOD uses the term *terrorism* for all “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant [interpreted to include unarmed or off-duty military personnel] targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”³ These two definitions outline a praxis of unsanctioned violence perpetrated for political, religious, or

ideological reasons; and one of unjustified terror that despises human life. First, it seems as if terrorism can only be perpetrated by subnational or subversive groups and that states are exonerated from being considered as agents of terrorism; and second, political resistance or opposition to the state is regarded as terrorism.

Such a view gives rise to a suggestive political rhetoric that detaches acts of violence from a state's own politics that might have contributed to people's fury and resistance. For example, the Nicaraguan Contras (supported by the United States during the 1980s) who killed 3,000 civilians were absolved from having committed state terrorism against those involved in political resistance. Likewise, the Soviet forces that encountered fierce resistance from Afghan Mujahidin "freedom fighters" during the 1980s were exonerated from having committed heinous atrocities in the name of combating "insurgent" (terrorist) violence.

The point we are making is that despotic regimes (often supported by superpowers) that quelled people's political struggles for national liberation were not considered as agents of terror. Often the "unlawful" violence perpetrated by such liberation groups as the Chechens and Kashmiris, Tibetans in China, Sri Lankan Tamils, Palestinians, Sikhs in India, Kurds in Turkey, Moros in the Philippines, Bengalis in Pakistan, Igbos in Nigeria, Eritreans in Ethiopia (before achieving independence), Albanian Kosovars in Serbia was considered "terrorist."⁴ Ironically, their political struggles against often repressive regimes are considered illegitimate and subversive. In other words, terrorism cannot be perpetrated by the state but only by resistant groups.

The upshot of such views is that terrorists are moral nihilists who stand outside the legal order and must be annihilated.⁵ This means that once terrorism is invoked, the state is not required to engage with domestic insurgents via political negotiations. Rather, it has the full moral authority to use unrestricted violence to wipe them out. Quite bizarrely, terrorists are described as having no homeland or conviction and as driven only by hate, unbounded cruelty, and murder. This might explain why Bashar al-Assad's military forces showed no remorse in executing the families and supporters of those liberation fighters opposed to the Syrian state, or why Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's government could violently eliminate political opposition in Libya. These despotic regimes are driven by the view that any political resistance is perpetrated by people who are hateful and barbaric, and therefore deserve to be killed. Therefore, it seems absurd to view terrorism as a form of political violence perpetrated only by those who oppose the state.

Instead, we contend that terrorism “uses violence and the threat of violence as a political weapon and takes conflict to a new level through the use of specific *means* of conflict and political action [in a way] that breaks through the limits of democratic politics.”⁶ What can be deduced from such a view is that terrorism is fundamentally a political phenomenon that seeks to transform society, whereby violence is exercised against both the state and civilians. People can resort to political violence and/or terrorism for various reasons: (1) an emotional appeal to public opinion, such as drawing attention to policies that, at least in their opinion, require further debate and questioning (e.g., the violent protests of certain British citizens against their country’s foreign policy with regard to Israel and Palestine); (2) when people who demand official recognition of their national or ethnic identity find that their claim to self-determination has not been constitutionally realized (e.g., the Irish Republican Army or the Basque separatists); and (3) out of an opposition to democracy, as in the claim made by some Arabs and al-Qaeda that political rule cannot be arrogated to human sovereignty but should be determined religiously through God’s will.⁷

What follows from the afore-mentioned views on terrorism is that it is quite possible that political violence can be executed by both the state and its citizens, as well as by people who have become disillusioned with a country’s stance on a variety of issues (e.g., the unresolved political crisis in the Middle East, their claims to self-determination, or their religious stances toward what can be perceived as illegitimate and blasphemous democratic rule). Hence, on the one hand terrorism seems to be associated with the exclusion or lack of recognition of certain groups of people and, on the other, a political disjuncture between the state and its citizens. If these conditions are causes of terrorism, then something can be done among the people, in their capacity as representatives of the state and civil society, to actually combat terrorist action or even its possibility. Our view is that people should aspire to engage in democratic iteration in order to reduce the potential of extreme political violence. But first, we shall examine different notions of jihad, particularly how this concept has been shaped by historical events in the Middle East.

Different Versions of Jihad: Radical or Defensive?

Since the preparations for the 9/11 attacks began in 1998 when Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network declared war on the United States, the concept of jihad – an exemplary religious action – has been accorded a militant and violent status. As a military ethic, it was linked to the attainment of purity

through perpetrating violence; as a violent conviction, it became associated with a struggle against what is perceived to be a “pagan” western civilization as well as a means through which Muslim “fighters” are urged to seek salvation through martyrdom. Bin Laden’s jihad or declaration of war against the United States is informed by three circumstances: the United States (1) occupied the most sacred places on the Arabian Peninsula in order to steal the natural resources, humiliate Muslims, and use military means to oppress Muslim peoples; (2) has inflicted grave damage on the Iraqi people and continues to do so by means of an embargo, although this has already cost the lives of a million people; and (3) is destroying Iraq and wants to break up the region’s other Arab states into defenseless mini-states to guarantee Israel’s superiority over them.⁸ Thus for bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network, jihad imposes on each Muslim the religious obligation to defend the territory of Islam against the invader. Consequently, jihad against the West is the Muslims’ highest obligation:

To kill the Americans and their allies – civilian and military – is an individual duty upon every Muslim in all countries, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque [in Jerusalem] from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken, and unable to threaten any Muslim.⁹

Moreover, al-Qaeda describes a group of young men recruited primarily from “below” who function with a large measure of autonomy in cells supported by shared convictions and commitment, while simultaneously being subjected to central control. What started off as bin Laden’s World Islamic Front for the Jihad against Jews and Crusaders turned into the al-Qaeda network guided by a rigorous militant ethic of conviction. This conviction was anchored in the group’s manifesto, *The Neglected Duty*, authored by Abd al-Salam Faraj (d. 1982), a member of bin Laden’s innermost circle and a former member of the Egyptian Jihad responsible for assassinating President Anwar al-Sadat (d. 1981). *The Neglected Duty* declares jihad equal to the five pillars of Islam (viz., believing in God, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage) and contains arguments in defense of the absolute priority of military struggle based on a rich store of Islamic traditions, conceptions, and practices.¹⁰

The purpose of this manifesto is to ensure the establishment of an Islamic state through violence, the prevalence of Shari’ah law, allegiance to a righteous leader (at the time, bin Laden), and persistent attacks against unbelievers and their allies with the intention of achieving martyrdom. Jihad is justified on the

basis of such verses as “Prescribed for you is fighting, though it be hateful to you” (Q. 2:216); “Ask God to grant you martyrdom” (Q. 3:7); “Smite above the necks, and smite every finger of them” (Q. 8:12); and “Count not those who were slain in God’s way as dead” (Q. 3:169). It seems as if al-Qaeda’s members have been indoctrinated with the view that Muslims all over the world have been subjected to excessive humiliation (especially by the United States)¹¹ and now have to use religious convictions, supported by Qur’anic authentications through prayers, recitations, and rituals, to justify their terrorist activities.

Now taking our view from the fact that this particular interpretation of jihad is recognizably different from that of the world’s mainstream Muslims, we want to reconsider the notion as to whether jihad has only one meaning.¹² Senior Saudi and Egyptian ulama have issued several fatwas denouncing the group’s radicalized violent actions (e.g., terrorist acts and suicide missions). Likewise, many moderate Muslim clerics have offered different interpretations of the Qur’an to disprove al-Qaeda’s offensive terrorist tactics.¹³ The meanings invoked by the moderate, non-violent Muslims go back to the word’s Arabic root: the individual’s “struggle” or “effort” to live a virtuous life by upholding religious values and propagating Islam through personal effort and example – often described by the Prophet as the “greater jihad.” Similarly, jihad became associated primarily with a defensive preservation of Islam in particular by indigenous people resisting European and American military invasions in the Middle East.¹⁴ We want to show that the argument about defensive jihad seems to have become more relevant to developments in that region over the past twenty-five years than a concern for searching for the “correct” version of jihad.

Radical or violent jihad (e.g., terrorism and suicide bombing) was highly unusual in the Arab and Muslim worlds about twenty-five years ago. There were no suicide missions during the height of Arab nationalism’s revolutionary fervor and the Arabs’ disastrous defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. Only in the early 1980s did the Lebanese Shi’ah employ successful – and devastating – suicide bombings against American targets. But it was the Hindu Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka who regularly used the suicide vest in the 1980s. Only afterwards did the frequency of suicide bombing in the Middle East escalate, a development that was due to the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan:

In 2007, the year with the highest rate to date, there were 658 suicide attacks, including 542 in US-occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, according to US government figures. This is more than double the number of attacks in any of

the past twenty-five years. Furthermore, more than four-fifths of all those suicide bombings occurred only in the last seven years, and the practice is now spreading around the globe. The *Washington Post* notes that “Since 1983 bombers in more than 50 groups from Argentina to Algeria, Croatia to China, and India to Indonesia have adapted car bombs to make explosive belts, vests, toys, motorcycles, bikes, boats, backpacks and false pregnancy stomachs ... Of 1,840 incidents in the past 25 years, *more than 86 percent have occurred since 2011*, and the highest annual numbers have occurred in the past four years.”¹⁵

Of course the motivations for the violent suicide bombings are multifold, ranging from the Muslims’ desire to defend the Muslim world to sacrificing their lives for Islam in order to achieve paradise, from economic and social deprivation to personal pathologies. However, some if not most of the violent actions come “in direct response to foreign occupation and the desire to rid the country of the invader.”¹⁶ It seems that most of the youth are radicalized by the situation on the ground rather than indoctrination by Muslim authorities. These realities include foreign occupation; the large-scale killing of civilians by American, European, or Israeli military forces; a sense of humiliation and defeat; and a thirst for revenge, sometimes for people killed in their own family.¹⁷ Religious justification seems to be used as an afterthought to provide moral support. This implies that the motivations for religious violence are not necessarily educational, but rather a defensive mechanism against unrelenting foreign occupation and what Muslims believe to be incessant humiliation. This view departs from the position that “education reproduces ... political violence.”¹⁸ Despite this somewhat impoverished view on what stimulates terrorist violence, we nevertheless agree with Wayne Nelles that one can respond non-violently, non-militarily, and creatively to violence through education.¹⁹

If defensive jihad were educationally inspired, then by far the majority of religious educational institutions would not have authorized their teachers and ulama to renounce the violence of radicals. In fact, the overthrow of Arab and Muslim despotic regimes, the struggle for national liberation, and thus armed resistance against foreign occupation, cannot be educationally motivated because the region’s countries lack defensible citizenship education programs. In those countries that provide citizenship education, emphasis seems to be placed on “social cohesion” or co-existence (Lebanon), “combating rebellion against authority” (e.g., riots, suicide operations, and belonging to armed opposition [Algeria]), “confronting growing threats and proliferation of extremist groups” (Egypt), “appreciation for government” (Oman), “loyalty to home-

land” (Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan), “patriotism” (Libya), and “allegiance to the King” (Bahrain).²⁰

It seems as if political literacy and critical thinking (aspects of oppositional politics) are given less attention in Arab and Muslim contexts. For instance, Lebanon’s civic education emphasizes “obedience rather than participation,”²¹ Saudi Arabia’s national education programs state “student teachers [pre-service teachers] tend to avoid politics as it might trouble their lives,” and Oman’s civic education is “not an integral component in teachers’” preparation program.²² This dearth of citizenship education programs has left these states’ education systems vulnerable to the dominance of authoritarian values, the lack of opportunities for participation in governance and decision-making, the prevalence of non-democratic and corrupt political regimes, and the curtailment of the freedom of speech and belief. One can therefore assume that their education systems have not done enough to teach citizens to be democratic or violent toward some of the region’s despotic regimes and foreign occupiers.

Now if education has not played a significant role in encouraging people to embark on jihad (whether through radicalization, albeit in an offensive or defensive way) to enact terrorism, but their rage has caused them to act violently, then it seems unlikely that terrorism could be meaningfully countenanced through reimagining and reinterpreting the concept of jihad. Considering that education has not played a significant role in perpetuating jihad, we want to invoke a concept of education that can contribute to countenancing terrorism. Our insistence on a plausible conception of education to combat terrorism is motivated not only by the fact that extreme radical groups have often abused and misappropriated the concept of jihad, but rather that education remains a credible response to ending dehumanization, global instability, and terrorism. But first, we offer an argument in defense of a plausible conception of education.

(Islamic) Education as a Countenance to Terrorism

Offering an argument in defense of a plausible conception of education necessitates a plausible understanding of what constitutes education. We know that education is commonly associated with acquiring knowledge. But what kind of knowledge – the norms and values required to be a productive member of society, a requisite set of skills so that we can fulfill a particular role? There are as many answers to these questions as there are questions themselves. For now, we would like to work from two premises: (1) to know ought to encom-

pass the notion of how to be – just to be as a human being – and (2) to know is just as problematic for those who do know as it is for those who do not know. By this we mean that if we have a society that contains both citizens who do and do not know, then the resulting unequal circumstances are problematic for both groups. In other words, an educated society is not exempt from the effects of an uneducated society, in much the same way that a privileged society is seldom detached from the underbelly of an oppressed society.

So if education means to know how to be, then what underscores the meanings of education in Islam, which, as we will argue, are distinctly different from Islamic education? Education in Islam is infused and shaped by the concepts of *ma'nā* (meaning), *'ilm* (knowledge), *'adl* (justice), *ḥikmah* (wisdom), *a'māl* (action), *ḥaqq* (truth), *nuṭq* (reason), *nafs* (self), *qalb* (heart), and *'aql* (intellect).²³ When woven together, these concepts are elucidated in what Islam holds education to be, defined by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas as the

recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into [wo]man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.²⁴

But this recognition and acknowledgment is progressively instilled into people, which leads one to the recognition and acknowledgement that God's proper place in the order of being and existence is not enough to lay claim to being educated. That particular claim can only be made once what has been known and understood is encapsulated in the notion of *adab* (right action). Therefore, we cannot comprehend and internalize why it is we are seeking to know that which we do not know until we are actually able to recognize God's proper place, and hence we cannot recognize our proper place in relation to God. Only through *adab* will we obtain the discipline of body, mind, and soul needed to ensure our recognition of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically, which, in turn, ensures that we enact our roles in accordance with that recognition.

Ultimately, if *adab* refers to the individual's acknowledgement of her right and proper place and her willing participation in enacting that proper place in society, then what emerges is a condition and enactment of *'adl*.²⁵ We contend, therefore, that education in Islam can be understood as disciplining the mind and the soul, which leads to a wellness of being, which, in turn, allows for the establishment and spread of a good society and, ultimately, the sustainability of a just society. This conceptualization is embedded and actualized in a two-

dimensional unity of the individual: one discerns itself in the form of the community and cohesion, and the other one reveals itself in the form of spiritual lucidity, way beyond the confines of communal or national identity.²⁶ The purpose of education in Islam, therefore, is to accentuate the individual's development in relation to her society so that she might interact with it based on the knowledge and acknowledgement of her social role.

It would seem that Islamic education, unlike education in Islam, is failing in its attempt to unify the purpose between the individual and her social identity. In fact, there appears to be strong evidence that in some contexts, Islamic education intentionally sets out to specifically divorce the individual Muslim from her pluralist society. Muslim students are often taught "to fix their 'differentness' by means of a critical and deprecatory discourse vis-à-vis the 'Other', the Westerner, whom 'they must never resemble'," an approach that eventually leads them to pretend, lose themselves in silence, or reject everything and rebel.²⁷ What is now called "Islamic education" is "confined to the very technical memorization of Qur'anic verses, prophetic traditions, and rules without a real spiritual dimension."²⁸ In terms of educational methods, Tariq Ramadan asserts that the teaching method employed at most Islamic educational facilities is that of listening rather than talking back, of accepting rather than questioning, and of believing rather than expressing doubt. The fact that Muslim students memorize long *suwar* (chapters) and *aḥādīth* (prophetic traditions) that have little impact on their daily behavior inevitably leads to them take on the outward form of Islam without having any contact with its spiritual base.

Moreover, it is not enough to limit Islamic education to studying Qur'anic verses, since the Islamic texts claim no responsibility for providing all of the knowledge and information needed by humanity.²⁹ So it should be neither unsurprising nor unexpected that the rote learning and memorization are described as being opposed to concepts of education based on the individual's autonomy and freedom and, ultimately, opposed to reason.³⁰ Such techniques are associated with indoctrinating students with a near-total rejection of western cultures, their values and lifestyles, an approach that ultimately leads to undifferentiated associations between Islamic education and danger, threat, and violence.³¹

The resulting chasm between education in Islam and Islamic education is at least partly responsible for creating an abyss between Islam and its teachings and the non-Islamic world. The "World Bank Report on Education Reform in North Africa and the Middle East" describes Islamic countries, or rather Muslim-majority countries, as being "in a state of gloom and anarchy

where leaders inherit their thrones for life and ensure the population remains in poverty with little care for the educational needs of the people.”³² In a region where 30% of the approximately 300 million people are illiterate, 60% of the population is under 30 years of age. In addition, the Arab world needs to create more than 100 million jobs over the next 10 to 15 years, something that can be attained only through education. Furthermore, the report confirms that the region has only invested 5% of its GDP and 20% of its government budgets in education over the past forty years.

Poor educational methods or unprioritized educational systems, however, do not mean that nobody is being educated. It simply means that the respective governments are unaware of what their citizens are being taught and, more importantly, who they are and what they are not learning. In fact, it is precisely because of their reticent approach to education that we should interrogate the type of education to which their citizens are being exposed. If they are not being taught in government-funded and -regulated schools, then they are learning somewhere else, which brings us back to the question of what education is and what it ought to do.

Education is commonly and generally couched and measured in terms of literacy and numeracy – hence the World Bank’s reference to a 30% illiteracy rate in the region under discussion. But education is shaped and yields to so much more than whether we are able to read, write, and count. Being literate and numerate does not equate to being educated; rather, it just means that one is able to read, write, and count. And so when juxtaposed against non-Islamic countries, where education is perceived to be in a better condition, the same question still needs to be asked: Is education taking place? In other words, are individuals being taught to know how to be? Does knowing how to be translate into being educated?

We posit that while education ought to be about knowing how to, education cannot be just about knowing, because (1) there is too much that we do not know without knowing that we do not know it and (2) “... to show that knowledge is limited not in the sense that there are *things* beyond its reach, but that there are human capacities and responsibilities and desires which reveal the world but which are not exhausted in the capacity of knowing things.”³³ So can we ever know the other? In the absence of actually experiencing the other, we can only know the other on the basis of her behavior. But this does not mean that we might not unknowingly experience the other, meaning that we do not necessarily have to know something or somebody in order to know it – sometimes we just know it or her – in the same way that there are certain things that we just cannot know.³⁴

How different, then, is Islamic education from education in Islam? While certain views, as discussed above, purport to be about the imparting of knowledge – to know how to be – there is a stark difference between knowing how to be within the framework of Islamic education at certain institutions and knowing how to be within the discourse of education in Islam. While the message from some Islamic education institutions appear to be that of detachment and aloofness – clearly differentiating between Muslims and others – education in Islam calls for connection and involvement. In describing the individual's attachment to her society, and in emphasizing the condition of the individual's existence on her society, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud states that: "An individual is meaningless in isolation, because in such a context he is no longer an individual, he is everything." This individual is one who has *adab*, who is aware of her individuality and proper relationship with God, society, and other creations of God. Therefore, she can live in a pluralist society without losing her identity.³⁵

The moderate depiction of education in Islam, as in its assimilation of *'ilm*, *qalb*, and *'aql*, is ultimately calling for an education that acknowledges the whole self. It opines that education is more than just knowing to be, that, in fact, it is knowing how to be with the mind or intellect and the heart.³⁶ Its inclusion of *'adl* and *haqq* are not confined to Muslims only, because to exercise *adab* means to extend humanity to all human beings so that when we know ourselves, we might know others and, ultimately, God. The more radical view calls for an Islamic education that replaces memorization and rote learning with an approach based on questioning and talking back so that we know the other through integration and engagement.

Ultimately, then, it is precisely the emphasis that both education in Islam and Islamic education place on knowing that brings them into contention and raises the question of whether either is sufficient to countenance terrorism. In other words, is it enough to know about the other in order to countenance acts of depravity and terrorism? In extending our argument in defense of a plausible conception of education to combat terrorism, we would like to assert that while it might be possible and plausible to know the other, both knowingly and unknowingly, this knowledge alone cannot countenance terrorism. Therefore, we hold that one has to experience the other, which, while related to knowing, is more than just knowing:

I accommodate myself to a universal human condition, or rather, a condition shared by all creatures endowed with sensuousness, a condition over which no one (possessing sensuousness) has a choice, save to be cautious. But the surmise that I have not acknowledged about others, hence about myself, the

thing there is to acknowledge, that each of us is human, is not, first of all, the recognition of a universal human condition, but first of all a surmise about myself.”³⁷

The universal human condition, described as being endowed with sensuousness by all creatures, can be enacted in a compassionate acknowledgment of the other so that we recognize the vulnerabilities of our mirroring humanity.

Education, when manifested in an aesthetic imagining of the other and encapsulated in universal acknowledgments of the other’s wellbeing, can countenance acts of inhumanity and terror because in that situation we are not individualistic identities, but common human beings with common hopes and common fears. Such commonalities underscore our common experiences. While the importance of reinterpreting jihad cannot be denied and should not be undermined – those Muslims who use it to justify their acts of terror have contributed to its misinterpretation – attempting to countenance terrorism cannot be done by simply reimagining and reinterpreting jihad. This is not to say that a reinterpretation cannot help eradicate terrorism or that eradication is the sole criterion for evaluating the importance of reinterpretation, but that such an undertaking would have to be accompanied by compassion and a re-imagined way of being.

Terrorism, as previously argued, is caused not by education but by our failure to experience the otherness of the other. We contend that education, if shaped by compassionate imagining, can countenance terrorism and present a credible response to dehumanization when we relate through experiencing others and when we recognize and act responsibly due to our common humanity. Next, we look at how Seyla Benhabib’s notion of democratic iteration allows us to enact and live out these experiences by connecting with the other, knowingly or unknowingly.³⁸

Democratic Iteration as a Means to Reduce Terrorism

Terrorist violence is a symptom not necessarily of a community’s formal educational processes, but rather a result of (1) people’s misrecognition of each other (e.g., the citizens’ view that the state lacks legitimacy, or the state’s refusal to concede the citizens’ sense of autonomy) and (2) the exclusion that causes them to suffer deprivations and grievances and, finally, turn to violence. Embedded in our argument that education can countenance terrorism is the proposition that such violence can be reduced if guided by compassionate

imagining, recognizing the other, and being responsible toward one another – a matter of recognizing our common humanity or our “capacity for communicative freedom,” known as democratic iterations.³⁹

By *democratic iterations* I mean complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims are contested and contextualised, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in associations of civil society.⁴⁰

At least three processes can be identified in the discourses of democratic iteration: (1) the capacity to initiate action and opinion to be shared by others through public argument; (2) through iteration, people respect one another enough to agree or disagree on the basis of reasons that they can accept or reject – a matter of deliberating as subjects and authors of opinions and laws; and (3) every iteration transforms, adds to, and enriches meaning in subtle ways.⁴¹ If terrorism were to be countenanced through democratic iteration, then people have to willingly initiate action to avoid violence, offer opinions that others can share, and embrace methods that are non-violent and/or restrict violence. Then, reasons have to be considered and reconsidered on the basis that terrorist violence is engaged in by people who are seemingly desperate for recognition and who despairingly see no chance of drawing attention to their interests. Responses to such views have to be opened up (that is, invoked and revoked) so that the threat of violence can be undermined and its proponents’ validity claims be questioned by asking if their demands can be satisfied only through violence. Likewise, a process of repeatedly talking through multiple causes of violence ought to move deliberations away from those forms of violence linked to overthrowing democratic governments with authoritarian or dictatorial ones to positions that reconsider those causes of violence that emerge from perceptions of injustice, lack of recognition, and denial of equal social status.⁴²

Although Benhabib seems to be clear on some contemporary dystopias – an increasingly militarized empire, world hegemony, subjecting every country to increasing criminalization and surveillance, punishing the poor via incarceration and letting the needy and destitute fall through the social net into criminality, as well as madness and drug abuse – she seems to be surprisingly reticent about terrorist violence and its risk to a democratic public sphere.⁴³ We contend that a democratic iteration is obliged to countenance both the dystopias and the uncertainty of terrorist violence, for only then can there be a successful response to the dystopia of terrorism. After all, a democratic it-

eration seeks to achieve democratic justice (i.e., to reach collective decisions that are just and legitimate) rather than concern itself with norms of human behavior that are valid for all times and in all places.⁴⁴ Thus democratic iteration attempts to help devise a language that can offer a more hopeful response to terrorist violence and compassion. We base this upon another of our contentions: While the languages of violence and compassion might evidently be different, they do not exist at opposite ends of a continuum and are not mutually exclusive. Inasmuch as one might know and experience the other compassionately, one might also, under different circumstances, encounter that same person violently or at a level of violence. Moreover, it is just as possible to respond to violence with a compassionate understanding of such behavior as it is to replace compassionate action with violent action.

What, then, should constitute this language that can offer a more hopeful response to both the perpetrator and the victim of terrorist violence? And given the complexity and density of our pluralist contexts, can we begin to assume that there really is a singular language that can talk to both the despondent and the hopeful, and the oppressor and the oppressed? Here we are not simply referring to interreligious or multicultural dialogue – this has been happening and, in most instances, has created spaces of mutual respect and understanding. What we are now exploring is the possibility of a communal language, something that is critical within and to a pluralistic society. Its composition would need to include and respect shared opinions, along with transformative meanings.⁴⁵ Also called “dialogue,” it would need to include the virtues of truth (of the self and of others; of the oppressor and the oppressed), shared values, teachings, and an attitude of sincerity to engage with the other.⁴⁶ According to Stanley Cavell,

In speaking of the vision of language ... and in emphasizing the sense in which human convention is not arbitrary but constitutive of significant speech and activity; in which mutual understanding, and hence language, depends upon nothing more and nothing less than our shared forms of life, call it our mutual attunement or agreement in our criteria. ... But though language – what we call language – is tolerant, allows projection, not just any projection will be acceptable, i.e., will communicate. Language is equally, definitively, intolerant – as love is tolerant and intolerant of differences, as materials or organisms are of stress, as communities are of deviation, as arts or sciences are of variation.⁴⁷

Thus far, we have made the following assertions: (1) terrorism is a form of political violence that is not caused by education; (2) education has played

an insignificant role in encouraging people to embark upon jihad (either offensive or defensive) to enact terrorism, which leads us to posit that while a reinterpretation of jihad should not be denied, a re-conceptualization of jihad would not necessarily reduce violence; and (3) terrorism is caused by uncertainty, hopelessness, and instability, all of which lead to human deprivation, exclusion, dystopia in the world, and, ultimately, outrage. So while education does not cause terrorism, it can serve as a credible response to political violence. Thus, if education is to countenance terrorism, it has to manifest itself through a communal language that can transform meanings by sharing opinions. This language, which is shaped by truth (ours and that of others), based on a value system of sincerity, and emerges from our mutual attunement, would have to be as tolerant of difference as it is intolerant of indifference. In short, this education needs to be about knowing the self (to know how to be) and the other (to know how the other is), as well as about experiencing the other through acting responsibly and recognizing our common humanity.

By using “capacity for communicative freedom,” namely, democratic iterations, we will now argue that the communal language required for an education of knowing and experiencing is a language of compassion.⁴⁸ This involves answering two questions: (1) Is a communal language of compassion plausible, and is it plausible to expect communities of difference to find a language that will facilitate an educative process of experiencing the other or both knowingly and unknowingly? and (2) What would give form and meaning to the communality of a communal language? To Jacques Derrida, the communality of our humanity is embedded in the human condition of compassion:

I think I need not fear contradiction in holding [wo]man to be possessed of the only natural virtue, which could not be denied him by the most violent detractor. I am speaking of compassion (*pitié*), which is a disposition suitable to creatures so weak and subject to so many evils as we certainly are: by so much the more universal and useful to mankind, as it comes before any kind of reflection; and at the same time so natural, that the very brutes themselves sometimes give evident proofs of it.⁴⁹

According to him, the natural emotion of compassion is, in essence, the constitutive core of our humanity, so embedded and virtuously natural that it cannot be refuted by the most violent of detractors or the most violent of acts.

A most profound example of compassion is found in Izzeldin Abuelaish’s “I shall not hate,” a personal account of a Palestinian doctor from Gaza, who tragically lost three of his daughters and a niece to an Israeli tank.⁵⁰ Instead of

bitterness, anger, and hatred, he chose to respond in a language of dignity and compassion, one in which he recognizes the humanity of those who perpetrated the killings, and one in which he has chosen to act responsibly by drawing on his own embedded humanity. If Derrida is correct in his assessment that “the very brutes themselves sometimes given evident proofs of it” (viz., compassion), then Abuelaish’s extraordinary compassion should not be found only in our response to him, but also within those who commit atrocities – in this case, the Israeli army who had “mistakenly” fired rockets at his home. Abuelaish had this to say: “...I believe that Israeli soldiers were driven into overkill by groundless fear fostered by so many years of hostilities and prejudice.”⁵¹

If we are all connected through Derrida’s natural virtue of compassion, then the possibility of feeling compassion for those who commit heinous crimes does not diminish the compassion we might feel for those who endure suffering. Recognizing the humanity in others also means recognizing the humanity in those who commit acts of inhumanity, because, ultimately, that is exactly what makes us recognizable to the other – our intrinsic humaneness.

Compassion as a moral necessity is an emotion directed at another person’s suffering or lack of wellbeing.⁵² In order to emotionally respond to another’s suffering or dystopia, one has to have both commonality and connectivity with the other. In other words, without commonality and connectivity or knowing and experiencing, there is only indifference that, in our opinion, stands in opposition to compassion because it infers a lack of emotion. This lack of interest or responsiveness contradicts our humanity. Compassion is capable of reaching sympathetically into multiple directions simultaneously, of imaging the suffering of others.⁵³ Education, therefore, should guide us through a communal language of compassion to not act indifferently to the suffering or hopelessness of others, and should guide us to believe that others do not deserve to exist in a state of despair and instability. Our knowing, experiencing, connectivity, and commonality should enable us to imagine ourselves in the suffering and despair of others.

If democratic iteration is to respond successfully to the dystopia of terrorism – which impacts both the perpetrator and the victim – so that, ultimately, democratic justice is achieved, then it has to be shaped and formed by a communal language of compassionate imagining. This achievement will enable us to recognize our communal humanity and respond to each other with compassionate responsibility. While we do not argue that such a communal language can offer a solution to political violence (whether offensive or defensive), because there will always be the unforeseen and the unexpected, we do argue that democratic iterations can offer a strategy of both knowing and experiencing the other through a language of compassion.

Finally, a process of democratic iteration shaped and formed by a communal language of compassion will not only serve as a hopeful response to terrorist violence – for both perpetrator and victim – but can also begin to stimulate a conversation in which an immediate *response* to violence might not be necessary, because: “If music presupposes voice, it comes into being at the same time as human society. As speech, it requires that the other be present to me as other through compassion.”⁵⁴ Stated differently, compassion and an education of democratic iterations should help us realize that whatever dystopias might exist have been caused by our failure to experience the otherness of the other. And therefore, whatever countenance might exist can only be found when we recognize that the vulnerability of the other is indeed the vulnerability of our common and communal humaneness. It therefore stands to reason that the same humanity that moves us to respond when the other is in a condition of hopelessness and despair should move us to act when the other chooses to respond violently to a situation that she perceives as intolerable and oppressive. Ultimately, who we are as compassionate beings is determined by how much we can aesthetically imagine ourselves as the other, not by how well we can construct acts of inhumanity into coherent narratives.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented an education in Islam that connects conceptually and pragmatically with the notion of democratic iteration. As a language of possibility or, more specifically, a communicative discourse of engagement and autonomous expression, democratic iteration does not occur independently of one’s sense of compassionate imagining. Put differently, engaging iteratively with others through experiencing them (without necessarily knowing them) involves learning to talk back with and to others in their otherness and simultaneously enacting one’s capacity to recognize one another’s vulnerabilities through profound acts of compassionate imagining. Only then can education in Islam have much more to offer than merely thinking differently about jihad in our efforts to countenance terrorist violence.

Endnotes

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