

African Muslim Diaspora: The Genesis of Contemporary Global Islamic Radicalism

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Abstract

African diaspora is a phenomenal history of primordial occurrence ostensibly buried alive in a shallow grave. Its seeming resurrection in contemporary time has become a reality seeking a global attention. One of the flying wings of that reality which can never be clipped is religion. Being a diehard cultural pivot, religion connotes different things to different people at different times. It is the totality of life to the average living majority of African Muslims in diaspora. Religion, especially Islam, in contemporary time, has become a form of science that requires a concentrate study by all and sundry. This is because religion has graduated from its hitherto personal status into an interpersonal one with global security implications. Most people now see the unfortunate incident of terrorism that occurred in United States on September 11, 2001 as the genesis of the current global Islamic radicalism. This view totally contradicts historical facts as it undermines the real cause of today's religious restiveness around the world. More than a decade before the US terrorism incident, there had been a signal pointing towards a possible religious turbulence at the dawn of the 21st century. But the signal was tactically ignored and treated as a non-issue. Today, many factors, like slave trade, religious dichotomy and economic insensitivity of former colonial masters still remind Africans in diaspora of their conditions. That reminder is like a whirl wind which should be calmed to allow peace in the 21st century. The modalities to adopt for it are some of the issues to be addressed in the body of this paper.

Preamble

The key word in this paper, 'Diaspora', originated from the Latin word 'diaspeirein' meaning 'dispersal'. African Diaspora therefore connotes the dispersal of Africans from the African continent to other continental regions of the world. The word 'dispersal' itself can be classified into two connotative usages. The one applies to the actual process of dispersing people generally from a place to another. The other refers to African individuals or groups who reside in continents outside Africa through voluntary or forceful emigration. The latter usage generally suits the description of the various individuals or groups of original Africans who were compelled to settle down in other continents. The collective body of such groups and individuals is called 'African Diaspora'. This does not however, foreclose what can be called intra-African Diaspora in which Africans of particular countries or ethnic groups settle down permanently in other African countries either for economic or political reason.

The term 'African Diaspora' was commonly used when referring to some minority ethnic or religious groups from Africa who were deemed to be facing difficulties arising from economic, political or religious discrimination especially in continents like Europe, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, North America, South America, Central America and the Middle East even long after the abolition of slave trade in the 19th century. For a long time, the social pedigree of such people continued to cast a shadow of enigma on them despite their vehement efforts to dispel that shadow.

However, the current mass movement of Africans to continents outside Africa, particularly Europe and America, as voluntary immigrants and asylum seekers, which has escalated at an alarming rate is a seeming confirmation that a large number of Africans are still compelled by economic and political considerations to be migrating to those continents in search of better life.

Today, the term 'African Diaspora' is seen as a phenomenal occurrence ostensibly buried alive in a shallow primordial grave. Its seeming resurrection in contemporary time has become a reality seeking global attention. One of the flying wings of that reality, which can never be clipped, is religion. Being a diehard cultural pivot, religion connotes different things to different people at different times. To some people, it is a means to an end. To some others, it is an end on its own. Yet, to the overwhelming majority of those who tenaciously adhere to it, religion is the totality of life in this world and in the world hereafter. They live and die by it. African Muslims in Diaspora belong to the last group. Thus, religion cannot be measured on the same scale with the same perception in all parts of the world.

Religion, particularly Islam, in contemporary time, has become a form of science that requires a concentrate study by all and sundry. This is because religion has graduated from its hitherto personal status into an interpersonal one with global security implications. Thus, bringing the various angles of religion to focus at international conferences or seminars of this type for the purpose of ventilating peaceful coexistence has become a sine qua none.

Most people now see the unfortunate incident of terrorism that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001 as the genesis of the current global Islamic radicalism. This view totally contradicts historical fact as it undermines the real cause of today's religious restiveness around the world. More than a decade before the US terrorism incident, there had been a signal pointing towards a possible religious turbulence at the dawn of the 21st century. But the signal was tactically ignored and treated as a non-issue.

Strange Experience

It can be recalled that at the climax of an economic recession in July 1990, an incident fortuitously occurred in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, which instantly attracted the

attention of the world but was quickly trivialized because of the global politico-religious implication it might entail. In that year, a radicalized Muslim Organization called 'Jama'atul Muslimin' suddenly seized the country's parliament and held the Prime Minister of that country, Mr. Arthur Napoleon Robinson, hostage during a public demonstration that was tagged 'one million man march'. Those desperate, Trinidadian Muslim demonstrators had traced their ancestral lineage to enslaved West African Muslims of Mandingo tribe. They had resented such compelling pedigree that made them perpetual second class citizens in a free world where human rights were globally emphasized.

Based on that resentment, they had severally tried to resist subsidiary treatment in the hands of their one time slave masters and they had demanded compensation with official apology from the government of that country for centuries of captivity, economic disenfranchisement, denied political opportunities and breach of fundamental human rights. Although they were not officially compensated, those demonstrators were also not sanctioned for embarrassing the government in that manner¹. Nevertheless, their action was a signal to other countries with similar history that such oppressed people could not be taken for granted indefinitely.

Modern research has shown that like ethnic Diasporas, Muslim Diasporas commonly share certain beliefs and aspirations upon which they practically live despite their diverse national, social and cultural origins. Thus, whatever happens to a group of Muslims in any part of the world is seen as an accident affecting all Muslims in other parts of the world. This is based not just on their common affinity as African adherents of Islam but more on a prophetic Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad) that proclaimed 'the Muslim Ummah as a unique building which bricks hold one another tenaciously to sustain the solidity of that building'. Should any of those bricks be afflicted the entire building would become seriously threatened².

This Hadith forms the basis of the consciousness of many Muslims particularly those living as minorities in some Western countries who see themselves as part of the global Muslim community otherwise called *Ummah*. Their feeling is often strengthened by the marginalisation, discrimination and media hostility to which they are relentlessly subjected.

Finding themselves in such a situation, the Western Muslims increasingly became radicalized in recent years and began to spread the tentacle of that radicalism as a form of armour. To them, using what they have to get what they want is a legitimate venture. They believe that after all, the same tactics was what the Western colonizers used to justify the callous enslavement of their ancestors which forced the latter into Diaspora. This situation was not peculiar to Muslims alone. It also applied to anybody (group or individual) who felt bitterly oppressed by the exploitative tendencies of their supposed 'hosts'.

Palestinian Diaspora

The Prophetic Hadith cited above has enabled Muslims (not only of African origin) to expand the definition of Diaspora in a way that further radicalizes them in contemporary world. This new definition took its root from an historical incident in Palestine through which the indigenous Arabs of that country were forcefully uprooted from their homes by the Jews who established the State of Israel in that country with the aid of Western powers in 1948³. Thus, by fleeing their country to find settlement in some other parts of the world those Palestinian Arabs became a chunk of Muslim Diaspora with required sympathy from the rest of the Muslim world.

The Palestinian Diaspora makes a significant difference for three reasons:

1. The overwhelming majority of the evicted Palestinians were Muslims who quickly drew the active attention of the Muslims in other parts of the world (Africa inclusive) to their plight.
2. The establishment of the State of Israel, with the third most sacred Islamic sanctuary (Al-Aqsa Mosque) embarrassingly lost its custody to the Jews who were not known to be sympathetic to the cause of Islam.
3. The consciousness of the Arabs of other countries that such a Jewish expansionist tendency in the heart of the Arab territory could be dangerous in future, not only for all Arabs but also for Islam.

These three reasons combined to make the global web of Islamic radicalism more formidable. And as a result, the Palestinian Diaspora became a new paradigm in the general concept of Diaspora in the sense that most of the evicted citizens of that country had to squat (against their wish) with their fellow Arabs in the neighbouring States like Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and others thereby causing unwarranted squabbles between them and their brotherly hosts. That unfortunate situation was viewed by the entire Muslim world as a peculiar case of Diaspora engendered by a diabolical conspiracy against Islam.

Genesis of the Palestinian Saga

The little historical digression here is necessary for the establishment of a linkage between the African Muslim Diaspora and the seeming global radicalism of Muslims in other parts of the world.

The idea of planting Israel as a State in the heart of the Arab world began with an ambitious observation made by a onetime Prime Minister of Britain, Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, at the dawn of the 20th century. This was subsequent to the abolition of slave trade by American President, Abraham Lincoln in 1863. The European colonialists began to work towards maintenance of the status quo without necessarily offending America. Some European strategists observed with concern the rapid ‘Arab Awakening’ in the context of Arab indigenous nationalism and passed the observation to the then British Prime Minister, Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman who also expressed his concern as follows:

“Empires are formed, enlarged and stabilized so very little before they disintegrate and disappear....Do we have the means of preventing this fall, this crumbling, is it possible to halt the destiny of European colonialism which at present is at a critical stage?”. To provide answers for these questions, Bannerman appointed a commission to do an appropriate study and report back.

To answer Bannerman’s question, the commission said in its report that: “It is necessary to fight against the union of popular masses in the Arab region or the establishment of any intellectual, spiritual and historical link between them ...and recommended the following four point agenda:

1. “To promote disintegration, division and desperation in the region
2. To establish artificial political entities that would be under the authorities of the imperialists countries
3. To fight any kind of unity whether intellectual, religious or historical and taking practical measures to divide the region’s inhabitants
4. To achieve this, a buffer State would need to be established in Palestine populated by a strong, foreign presence which would be hostile to its neighbours and friendly to European countries and their interest”.

Bannerman then made the following observation as a prelude to the elongation of European imperialism:

There are people who control spacious territories teeming with manifest and hidden resources. They dominate the intersections of world routes. Their lands were the cradles of human civilizations and religions. These people have one faith, one language and the same aspiration. No natural barriers can isolate them from one another....If, per chance, these people were to be unified into one state it would then take the fate of the world into its hands and separate Europe from the rest of the world. Taking these considerations seriously, a foreign body should be planted in the heart of this nation to prevent the convergence of its wings in such a way that it could exhaust its powers in never-ending wars. It could also serve as a spring board for the West to gain its coveted objects⁴.

Two major issues are noticeable in Bannerman's observation quoted above. One is the domination by the Arabs of the trade routes between the West and the East. The other is the formidable Islamic identity of the Arabs which posed a challenge to the Western Christian ideology. Both of these issues would have far-reaching effect on the economic and socio-political wellbeing of the West if left untouched hence the plan for the devastating blow.

Bannerman's observation was however in further pursuit of an earlier demand by Theodor Herzl, a leader of the Zionist movement founded in 1879. Herzl, an Austrian Jewish lawyer and journalist had earlier expressed his wishful demand thus:

“Let sovereignty be granted us (Jews) over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation; the rest, we shall manage by ourselves...”⁵

The Balfour Declaration

In a favourable response to that clandestine request (of Theodor Herzl), another British Prime Minister, James Arthur Balfour, issued a devastating declaration that now bears his name on November 2, 1917 thus:

“His majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this objective.... The rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country shall not be prejudiced by the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”⁶.

Palestine, by that time, had come under the protectorate of Britain following the defeat of Turkey, an ally of Germany, in the two world wars that ended in 1918 and 1945 respectively. That declaration by Balfour which conceded a major part of Palestine to the Zionists as a home has since put the whole of the Middle East in an incessant turmoil causing what is now called terrorism around the world.

To effectively implement that declaration some other Middle East countries had to be 'Balkanized' or incapacitated socially, economically and politically by excising from them, a juicy chunk of their lands. Thus, Lebanon was excised from Syria and Kuwait from Iraq. The strategy was to cause a dissension among the citizens of those Countries with the intention of breaking the yoke of the Muslim unity which Bannerman had targeted in his precipitate observation quoted above. Thus, the Palestinian Diaspora took the dimension of an internal Diaspora which was never in a foreseen picture. And when the implementation of the Balfour declaration began in 1948 it became clear that the 'brook' of the world had been stirred up in Palestine where the Western powers had substituted a Diaspora for another Diaspora.

That singular incident has since rendered the entire world so restive that the hitherto relative peace between the West and the East has ceased to provide any meaningful succour for the peoples of both worlds. Thus, if any Islamic radicalism is experienced in the West today, its genesis should be traced not only to the obnoxious observation of Bannerman at the dawn of the 20th century and the infamous Balfour declaration of 1917 but also to the agonizing memory of centuries of slavery to which the ancestors of today's African Diaspora were subjected. The combination of these two memorial events can hardly be obliterated in the hearts of their victims without a serious effort on the part of the Western governments to right the wrong by compensating the aggrieved and by stopping further aggression against Muslims in other parts of the world. The strong link between the African and Arab Diasporas is the chord of faith weaved firmly by the religion of Islam.

Western Perception of Islam

One fact that needs to be well understood by the Western powers is that since Islam or its evangelism was not the cause of African or Arab Diaspora in the West, no solution to the aftermath of such Diaspora can be expected to come by curbing the influence of Islam as now being tacitly done in Europe and America. As a religion, Islam has become a formidable force in the world, not necessarily by the means of arms but rather by serving as a seemingly realistic alternative to any spiritual confusion arising from other contemporary ideologies in the world. And that is why Islam keeps spreading at an increasing rate today especially in the West despite the all-out propaganda against it and persecution of its adherents.

It must be remembered that the adoption of Islam by African Diaspora in the West was not originally out of conviction but as a means of expressing resentment for the West's policy of 'man's inhumanity to man' of which they happened to be victims. But with time, most of them came to realize that there was a valuable spiritual substance in that religion, after all, which could serve as armour for them to repel the social and cultural suffocating heat emanating from their former slave masters.

Perhaps few Western elites have been able to study and understand this scenario as much as the famous Irish playwright, Sir George Bernard Shaw who had stated as far back as 1936 as follows:

If any religion had the chance of ruling over England, nay Europe within the next hundred years, it could be Islam....I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phase of existence which can make itself appeal to every age. I have studied him-the wonderful man, and in my opinion, far from being an anti-Christ, he must be called the Saviour of Humanity....⁷

I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness. I have prophesied about the faith of Muhammad that it would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow as it is beginning to be acceptable to the Europe of today.⁸

The population of Muslims in Europe and America combined in 1936 when Shaw made that prophetic statement was less than six million. Today, that population has risen to about 40 million an indication that Islam in recent times has not just been getting the ears of the people in the West it has also been winning their souls Diaspora or no Diaspora.

The problem with fighting a spiritual ideology needs to be seen in the formidability of its pivot as an invisible diehard substance. The more you strive to crush it the harder it becomes. It is possible and even easier to kill a believer than to kill his belief.

When the importation of Africans as slaves into the United States began in 1619⁹, it hardly occurred to the pioneers of that adventure that they were importing into that country what could become a future nemesis. The emergence of Barack Obama as the first black American President recently has become a vivid reminder that history truly has a way of repeating itself. Or how else could we have been practically reminded of the Biblical and Qur'anic story of Pharaoh and Moses? If it is possible for a descendant of the slaves of yore to become the boss of the sons and daughters of the slave masters what can prevent Islam from becoming the future religion of the West as predicted by Shaw?

Conclusion

Since in a rapidly changing world, nothing can be accurately predicted the West must tread softly in its war against Islam. The seeming hostile focus on that religion with the intention of castigating it as an enemy to be defeated may rather further radicalize its adherents than forge the desired peace for the world.

Given the fact that most Africans who are seeking greener pasture in Europe and America are driven by poor economic conditions in their countries, it is advisable that the advanced Western countries increase their economic aids to such African countries without stringent conditions at least to reduce the wave of emigration to the West.

Governments of the Western countries should endeavour to discourage the spate of criticism against Islam especially the denegation of the person of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) as well as the fundamental tenets of his Message especially through the media.

Contrary to a misconception in certain quarters, religious conflicts in most parts of the world especially between the Muslims and the Christians are not caused by intolerance but by deliberate provocation. And unless the spate of the ongoing provocations is effectively curbed, the rate of religious conflicts around the world may be difficult to stem.

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