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## I. GENESIS AND EXODUS: THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND PERSIAN DIASPORA (Birmingham–Frankfurt–Tehran)

“ALL WELCOME, INCLUDING gays, Jews and paedophiles”, read the words firmly imprinted at the bottom of the poster advertising the university Islamic society’s next lecture. At the time I remember shaking my head and thinking to myself that they’d really done it this time. This time, they’d well and truly overstepped the mark. A few weeks later the university temporarily banned the student Islamic society. This came after the umpteenth warning requesting that they refrain from making either anti-Semitic or homophobic remarks. Secretly, I’m sure that some non-Muslim students and staff alike felt that the ban was long overdue, that the university student union had been dithering over the issue for far too long, that if any of the other student societies (especially those comprised of mainly white members) were to publicly espouse anti-Islamic, racist or bigoted views, they would have been banned on the spot.

At the Friday sermon immediately after the ban, those running the Islamic society (the same people responsible for the poster) expressed outrage at the decision. The speaker used the sermon to illustrate how the ban reflected the hypocrisy of the West, which boasted of the sacrosanct status of freedom of speech, yet increasingly sought to deny ‘us’ Muslims the right to speak freely on issues such as the atrocities Israel was committing against the Palestinian people (although I did not quite follow how linking Jews to paedophiles forwarded this particular argument). This was the ‘hypocrisy of democracy’, the speaker sought to remind us. What the incident reminded ‘us’, was not so much the hypocrisy of democracy, but more that ‘we’ (or more accurately, our ‘apathy’) had voted the bigots into power. The more the speaker tried to convince us that ‘they’, the elected members, were the innocent victims in this whole scandal, the more it reflected the depth to which they had alienated themselves from the mainstream Muslim student population.

The radicalisation of some sections of the British Muslim community is just one of a number of ever-increasing factors that give Islam and Muslims a higher profile in Britain and other parts of the Western world. The Salman Rushdie affair, the first Gulf War, 9/11, al-Qa’ida, Afghanistan, Bali, the

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second Gulf War, Madrid, London, the list grows ever longer. Why? Why Islam? Why Muslims? When the collapse of the communist bloc resulted in most of the developing world navigating a path towards liberal democratic ideals, the Muslim world appears to shun the increased prosperity and concern for human rights that such societies seek to afford their citizens. Not only do the customs and rituals of the developing Muslim countries appear strange and out of place in the modern world, but more worryingly, an increasing number of its followers appear to gravitate towards extremism and fundamentalism.

As appealing as these Western propositions appear, they are fundamentally flawed. Truly liberal democratic societies are still a rare species outside North America and Western Europe (many are democratic simply in name). And this phenomenon we call fundamentalism can be found in virtually all societies. Christian fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, even secular fundamentalism, are but a few of many. The reason the West is not as preoccupied with these other fundamentalisms is because, with the exception of Christian fundamentalism, Westerners are rarely affected by them. Ironically, in the case of Jewish and Hindu fundamentalists, it is Muslim communities that appear most at risk of incurring their wrath.

The incident with the poster occurred several years ago whilst I was a university student in London. Even then it was becoming evident that in the coming years relations between the West and the Arab/Muslim world would become increasingly strained. At the time I wanted to visit the Middle East to write a book that explored some of these tensions and further attempt to tackle some of the misconceptions that each society appears to be developing about the other, but I had neither the finances nor the time to complete such a project. Now, several years later, I found myself in the living room of my home in Birmingham, reminiscing about the poster incident whilst waiting for the taxi to the train station, from where I would catch a train to the airport, from where I would catch the first of two flights to the Middle East. Finally, I would write a book that might shed a little light on some of the issues that currently affect relations between the West and the Arab/Muslim world in the now post-9/11 era.



The taxi driver who took me to the train station was a young Muslim man of Pakistani origin. Like many private-hire drivers of Pakistani descent that work in the city, the inside of his taxi was decorated with sticky-back emblems depicting various calligraphed Quranic verses. This use of aesthetic symbolism to publicly espouse the religious component of one's

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ethnic identity is rare amongst English taxi drivers. Where cultural markers are used, they tend to express profane rather than sacred components of the English identity (such as affiliation towards football clubs). It may appear to be a miniscule and unimportant cultural difference, but this difference wonderfully highlights the extent to which religious faith continues to dominate the cultural identity of Muslim communities the world over.

During the short journey to the railway station, the radio was tuned into the news. Bin Laden dominated the headlines. Although the United States had been unable to capture him, the Afghan military campaign was coming to an end. America was successfully completing the first phase of its self-proclaimed War on Terror. Those critics who predicted the campaign would take months, possibly years, had been proved wrong. I asked the taxi driver what he thought about the war in Afghanistan. Neither the substance of what he told me, nor the vehemence with which he delivered his answer surprised me. I had heard such arguments before. They were shared by many British Muslims. He felt that the US bombing campaign had led to the killing of innocent civilians. Whilst he did not condone the events that took place on 9/11, those unjust attacks on US soil were the result of its unjust foreign policy in the Middle East. America still had not learnt the lessons of 9/11 and he believed further attacks on its soil would follow. His comments reminded me of Malcolm X's, "chickens have come home to roost", speech made in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination. Was Uncle Sam simply reaping what it had sown? Or was there a failure by this taxi driver to sufficiently recognise and condemn unjustifiable acts committed in the name of a religion that he was going out of his way to tell his passengers he belonged to?



The plane to Frankfurt was small and not very impressive. Not at all the jumbo jet that I had imagined would transport me to the exotic land that is Frankfurt Airport. On board, I found myself seated next to a very important-looking German businessman. Having had only a light breakfast, I was feeling hungry and looking forward to being fed once we were airborne. Sure enough, a few minutes after take-off the cabin crew began serving lunch. The male flight attendant serving us informed me that lunch would consist of a ham baguette and a small carton of yoghurt. I politely told the attendant that I didn't eat ham, and could I have the vegetarian option instead. The flight attendant gently smiled back at me and politely informed me that, as he had already mentioned, they were *only* serving ham baguettes. He handed me the lunch pack and said that I could simply have

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the fruit-flavoured yoghurt if I didn't eat ham. I was not happy. I looked at the miniscule carton of peach yoghurt before me. After one spoonful I decided to read the list of ingredients on the side of the carton. GELATINE—the words shot up at me from the side of the carton and smacked me in the face. I didn't eat gelatine. I placed the carton back on the tray. It tasted disgusting anyway.

My tummy was still rumbling. My conscience decided to call an emergency debate on whether or not it would be permissible for me to remove the ham from the baguette and just eat the salad filling. It would no longer be a ham baguette then, just a lettuce- and two-tomatoes baguette. The motion was rejected, as my conscience issued a fatwa declaring that such an act would not be permissible. My epic journey to the Promised Land would have to be undertaken on an empty stomach. I needed to be up for the challenge, to rise to the occasion. It was moments like this that defined great people. I would prove I was up to the challenge, and with the help of three glasses of apple juice, I managed to make the first leg of my trip to Frankfurt Airport.



The Iranian Revolution of 1979 sent shock waves throughout the world, turned American foreign policy in the region on its head and changed the face of the Middle East.

Iran (formerly Persia) is steeped in history and culture. Their people are part of a civilisation that dates back several thousand years; theirs is a society whose contribution to human civilisation has been immense. By the late 1970s though, the country was in trouble. Its people were under the rule of the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. He was blessed with an oil boom that had flooded the country with millions of petrodollars. This in turn brought untold wealth and riches to a country desperately trying to recapture former glories. But like many other Middle Eastern countries that benefited from the discovery of oil under their soil, this newfound wealth did not trickle down to the masses. And the masses were not best pleased.

As the decade came to an end, large sections of the population felt alienated from a regime they saw as corrupt, unjust and out of touch with the people. As the voices of protest grew louder, the Shah began to adopt increasingly violent measures to repress anti-government sentiment. These voices of protest came from all sectors of society. They emerged from the rural areas where many of the poor lived. It was the villagers who had least benefited under the Shah's rule. They also came from the urban middle-classes who

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