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Review of
ISLAM UNDER SIEGE
by: Akbar S. Ahmed

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Akbar Ahmed's book, entitled *Islam Under Siege*, provides an academic Muslim perspective on the problems of social cohesion in Islamic countries and the lack of productive dialog between these countries and the West, which are leading to the further deterioration of the situation. The first half of the book is concentrated largely on explaining reactions of Muslims to the United States and the breakdown of social cohesion in the Middle East in the face of globalization. The middle of the book, for me the most revealing chapter, *Ibn Khaldun and Social Cohesion*, reveals the unfortunate fate of the Muslim scholars as society's respect for *ilm* does not compare with the Quran's great emphasis on it. The second half of the book deals more concretely with specific problems in Islamic society today, such as poor leadership, the perversion of honor, and the drastically varying stances of inclusion and exclusion. Writing to a broad English-reading audience of Muslims and Americans/Europeans in reflexive anthropological form, Ahmed seems to try and clear up misunderstandings while assigning a degree of responsibility to respective groups, and by doing so create a dialog encouraging inclusion and the foundations for *adl* or justice, *ihsan* or compassion, and *ilm* or knowledge in Muslim society (Ahmed 171).

Ahmed sets up his first chapter by making references to globalization which lead into his thesis of a post-honor world. The emphasis on globalization is made to unsettle a common misunderstanding that the problem is really Islam. On the contrary, he supposes that in the last several decades it is globalization that has uprooted traditional societies all throughout the developing world (Ahmed 47). According to Ahmed, however, the attacks on the World Trade Center did in fact impede globalization, but to what end, he is not sure (Ahmed 48). Although, he is quite certain that, "Globalization appears to challenge the

primary forms of identity that surround most individuals: family - "

families are split as individuals leave home to look for employment or in response to a political or cultural situation, sometimes never to return; tribe - sections of the tribe migrate to already swollen urban areas and, as the central genealogical principle of common descent weakens, begin the process of losing their identity; state - political and economic transformations affect every aspect of the state especially the idea of defined borders and in turn bring about changes in society; religion - the materialism and consumerism of globalization challenge the spiritual core of religion. (Ahmed 51)

When these forms of identity are eroded to their core, the individual takes religion on to serve as a medium for delivering justice through terms of honor and revenge (Ahmed 52). Both post-honor society and a state of anomie can follow from globalization. As the individual becomes anxious and feels less certain of the future, he responds with intense loyalty to a group that will guarantee identity. Ahmed calls this hyper-*asabiyya* (Ahmed 57). Yet the definition of honor has drastically changed since the times of chivalry. Truth, honor, generousness, and courtesy were to have categorized the old conception of honor, but today these have been replaced by revenge and violence (Ahmed 59). As post-honor, hyper-*asabiyya*, and anomie are perhaps the most important concepts to this book, we will see how the book best contributes to these themes.

Chapter 3 discusses Ibn Khaldun's idea of *asabiyya*, an organizing force that humans need in order to build stable and just societies (Ahmed 77). Khaldun predicted the eventual dissolution of *asabiyya*, because he saw that as tribal invaders from the mountains invaded and took over cities, they would lose their cohesion amidst the different values of urban life (Ahmed 79). So after the imperialists left Islamic countries to govern themselves, the inhabitants struggled with selecting identities remaining from imperialism and tribal identities from long before (Ahmed 80). Hyper-*asabiyya* is the result of *asabiyya's* breakdown. Essentially what happens is that as widespread economic and social

urban change takes place in Islamic countries due to political turmoil, globalization or other factors, the values which made up the previous society begin to pull apart. This is the breakdown of *asabiyya*. Justice, compassion, and balance are all lost when *asabiyya* breaks down, because it is the social order that allows these institutions to stay strong. Without Justice and balance, chaos and conflict ensue. A tight adherence and loyalty come out of the chaos as others try to create organization. This hyper-*asabiyya* pits one group against another without a form of justice or balance to regulate it (Ahmed 57).

Honor holds a great deal of power in Islamic society. In chapter two Ahmed makes clear that "the actions of Monica Lewinsky, Bill Clinton, and bin Laden set the stage for September 11. Muslim reading of Clinton had much to do with their planning for September: If the President of the United States was a man without honor his people could not be different" (Ahmed 67). President Clinton's exhibition of post-honor displayed the values of an immoral nation. Lewinsky was portrayed as part of a Jewish conspiracy to get Clinton impeached so the supposedly more pro-Israel Al Gore would take office (Ahmed 69). Although such arguments seem ridiculous to us, such are the rumors that get spread around the less educated Muslim communities.

But when hyper-*asabiyya* combines with and tries to wield the concept of honor it takes on a debauched definition of the word. The perversion of honor is probably best exemplified in this book by women becoming, through rape, the targets of dishonor (Ahmed 119). This book is riddled with frightening anecdotes of gang rape and mutilation in India and other locations. Rape is used in wartime to intentionally psychologically humiliate the enemy. As horrible as this may be, Ahmed finds an even larger disturbance in rapists' connection with this act as being divine (Ahmed 122). It does not make sense then

for rapists to be viewed with honor, but the act has a dishonoring affect on its enemies, thus scoring a victory for the rapists' side. This act is thus supported by a sense of perverted honor unrestrained due to the lack of *asabiyya*.

But honor is also defined in broader terms of violence. Bin Laden views his calls to violence against the United States as honorable (Ahmed 60). Ahmed gives the example about a Palestinian girl who committed suicide as a suicide bomber, killing others around her. Her sacrifice is described as very honorable, but from the side of the victim or traditional warfare, one clearly sees such an act of terror as very dishonorable, if not cowardly (Ahmed 63). Ahmed is vehemently opposed to violence in association with honor or Islam. The Quran, he says, "could never justify the taking of a single innocent life" (Ahmed 59). This is easily supported by God's most common name in Islam, Beneficent and Merciful.

The most revealing section of this book was the portion about Islam's regard for scholars and *ilm*, *The Man in the Iron Cage*. Islam emphasizes the importance of knowledge and scholarship, yet the governments of Muslim society themselves have little respect for their scholars. The lack of education in a society that should value knowledge above all, has tremendous implications for the condition it is currently in. As Ahmed states, "with the scholars driven out [...] it is not surprising that the Muslim world's educational achievements are among the lowest in the world. [...] women are deprived of their inheritance and their rights, and the men in their families tell them that this is Islam" (Ahmed 91). With no scholars to contribute to a receptive Islamic society, groups like the Taliban have it easier to spread their constricted interpretation of Islam (Ahmed 91). I found the story of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the translator of the Quran into English, cold,

hungry, and on the streets of England to be very tragic. The apathy of the Pakistani government toward his condition, just like the apathy toward Ahmed struggling to get on a train on his exam day exhibit a problem I could not have known about otherwise.

Largely accredited with the constraint of rights are the Muslim leaders of today and the political systems they uphold. Most cannot secure *adl*, *ihsan*, or *ilm* in their respective countries, because these leaders are mostly corrupt military dictators or kings who do not have popular support of their people (Ahmed 107). Some like Tariq Ali want to abandon Islam and build up a revolutionary communist Middle-East, but as Ahmed points out, this would be impossible due to anti-communist sentiment throughout the Islamic parts of the world (Ahmed 180). Others, like Musharraf had started out with better intentions, but holding the highest position corrupted him to the core (Ahmed 130). The best route, Ahmed believes, is that the closer the Islamic state comes to the one as seen in the Quran in the days of the Prophet, the closer the Islamic state will actually come to balance, knowledge, and compassion (Ahmed 106). Ahmad does not mean to say that it is impossible to have an Islamic leader who believes in such things as women's rights. Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan had no qualms with that topic (Ahmed 112). Ahmed even points out how Khadijah and other women lived during the time of the Prophet. He claims the sort of restrictive role put on women was a recent development of imperialism (Ahmed 117). Indeed, after the end of colonialism, women began to rise in society, but Ahmed sees this as a small minority of Islamic women. Most "are still trapped in local, tribal codes and customs that do not permit them to benefit from their Islamic heritage" (Ahmed 119).

Ahmed identifies two types of thought in Islam: inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion would be the most ideal form to follow. It has an Andalusian spirit of co-existence and

dialogue. He exemplifies this in the case of the Islamic Center in Toledo, Ohio, where Christians made a human gate around the mosque to stop perpetrators from firing bullets at the mosque (Ahmed 135). Ahmed attributes educated leadership to these mosques as the fundamental basis for sponsoring inclusion (Ahmed 136). His attempts at educating Muslims and others about Jinnah in the creation of a documentary proved to be largely blocked by opposition and inner-fighting between him and his directing crew (Ahmed 129). He had no real choice but to resign from his post in the foreign office, lest he be transferred and continue working for a corrupt regime. Worse yet, Pakistani media ran a smear campaign against him in addition to the Foreign Office withholding pension and money owed to him (Ahmed 131). This shows a failed attempt at trying the inclusive route. It unfortunately carries with it a pessimistic outlook of such future attempts. The film was released, and after long contemplating its worth, he was informed that a boy who was once on the road toward violence saw the movie and decided he wanted to be a Jinnah. This made it worth it (Ahmed134).

Exclusion is shown in the case of the Taliban. This portion of the book was quite interesting as it painted a much different picture of the Taliban than the Western press had heretofore presented. Pukhtunwali, the laws of the Pukhtun, account for many of their mistreatments of minorities and women, things the Western press have falsely connected with Islam (Ahmed 142). The Taliban is not isolated in Afghanistan though. They exist as a political, social and religious movement in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh as well. They spread these values through madrassahs (Taliban schools of Islam), that teach only Islamic lessons from the Quran and Shari'a (Ahmed 144). When it comes to other religions, the Taliban espouse a philosophy of destruction, not defamation. Their goal is to destroy

un-Islamic things, not to humiliate them. This stems from a historical Taliban hero, Mahmud of Ghaznavi, who went deep into India "smashing" their idols, not selling them (Ahmed 147). This lends understanding to their actions when they blew up a statue of Buddha in 2001, but understandable or not, it did still upset and rub foreign leaders the wrong way.

Ahmed concludes the book by giving advice to both Muslims and the West. Ahmed asks that Muslims stop believing big conspiracy theories about the West as Satan (Ahmed 153). He also states that Muslims must adopt democracy, because it is the best system for a society to be free of "corruption and mismanagement" (Ahmed 154). Another important element is encouraging education, and he recommends expanding the curriculum of the madrassahs and other schools in Muslim countries. As his argument goes, once *adl*, *ihsan*, and *ilm* come back, Islamic society will be a rich and stable one again (Ahmed 154). Very importantly, he says that Muslims have to return to tolerance of minorities and other religions, as this is an important ideal in the Quran (Ahmed 155). The West, on the other hand, as a world power should be pro-active in using its power to get sloppy Muslim governments to clean up. A long term plan that emphasizes education and dialogue is extremely important here. Misunderstandings need to be clarified, and the West needs to take the first step forward (Ahmed 157). Finally, when the West sees that Muslims are not revolting against the West, but instead against corruption and smut, things at the moment associated with the West, that should calm things down and put both societies on a better path (Ahmed 159).

Islam Under Siege has several very strong points, but I feel that the book itself lacked organization. Often, an example from the text would arise whereby the meaning just

could not be deciphered, or there existed a lack of connection between one thought and the next. While the main points of the book came across quite clearly, large portions as well as small were unclear in their significance and relevance to the overall theme of the book.

On page 56, the paragraph preceding the heading *ii A Post-Honor World?*, contained an anecdote about a cell phone commercial shown on television in the United States. As it goes, "A young successful executive is talking on a mobile phone when two muscular men dressed in overalls walk in and proceed to strip him of his clothes, lift up his swivel chair with him still in it, and hurl it out the window of his top-floor office. In the next scene the man is wearing nothing but a cardboard box and standing in line waiting to buy a hamburger" (Ahmed 56). The instance of the anecdote is foremost strange, which is not uncommon of commercials, but Ahmed's explanation of this anecdote is even stranger. He says that we are vulnerable in this modern world, and we can easily be stripped socially, economically, and militarily if we happen to pick the wrong cell phone provider (Ahmed 56). The problem is not so much that the explanation does not make sense, rather, the anecdote itself has no correlation to the subject-matter being discussed. Sometimes while reading this, I get the feeling he is trying to adopt a writing style that is not well suited to him.

I feel that Ahmed contradicts himself several times in the book when he comes across the subject of ways of analyzing the terrorists on the 11th of September or Muslim attitudes toward the West in general. When trying to explain the attacks on 9/11, the American press and media answered that the terrorists were simply jealous, envious, and hated us. Take note of this jealousy and envious point. Ahmed dismisses these "psychiatric" terms by throwing them in with radical words from the Reverend Jerry

Falwell (Ahmed 12). Later in the book when Ahmed describes his experience trying to create a video documentary on Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, he clearly labels Muslims as having a jealous and malice-like nature and sense of justice (Ahmed 133). I can understand his despair and choice of words in this situation, but he contradicts himself. He is giving Muslims the stereotype of psychological conduct that the American press and media had labeled terrorists much earlier, thereby contradicting his own beliefs of how Muslims thought of the West.

On page 8, Ahmed says that "whether one adheres to the notion of the clash of civilizations, or whether one chooses dialogue, understanding Islam will be key" (Ahmed 8). I disagree with this statement completely. The teaching of a clash between civilizations will most certainly hinder relations between the West and the Islamic world. This will not help the West overcome Islamophobia, even if the "civilization clash" adherents do understand Islam. Teaching it as an outdated way of looking at international affairs would be ok, but to teach it as an adherence would be devastating to Islamic and Western relations for the future to come.

Generalized statements also make his argument a bit weaker. On page 16, he says "Honor and revenge; this is the male interpretation of social action" (Ahmed 16). I can clearly say that as a male, honor and revenge are not my interpretations of social action, nor do I believe that they are values held by a large percentage of males. Even if it were true for a majority, such generalizations make arguments less credible. His argument concerning a male dominated world stage after September 11th does not register as a defining cause of post 9/11 crises. His argument hinges on the aspect that all males in the post-honor society interpret honor to have violent and vengeful connotations, yet we can look to the reason

why Americans join the army, and it is almost always for reasons of protecting one's family--not to take revenge. I do not believe that the lack of women on the world stage was indictable to foreign policy that dealt only in terms of honor or post-honor.

My last concern is that the book hardly addresses how the West should deal with terrorist organizations. Taliban and bin Laden are referenced many times in this book, but it is difficult to imagine being one-hundred percent friendly to Muslim nations when clearly there is still the threat of terrorist attacks. It makes sense to enter into a dialogue with Muslim society, but with the shadow of terrorism looming overhead, there needs to be a policy to deal with that. I fear that dialogue may be difficult to encourage when a war against Islamic terrorism is being led at the same time, regardless if it receives a bit of support from the Muslim world.

Ahmed's book does deserve some praise though. I was very impressed by the adoption of Ibn Khaldun's collapse of *asabiyya* to explain Islamic society. This is particularly impressive, because it gives us three specific objectives: *adl*, *ihsan*, and *ilm*. To achieve these, we simply need to reconstruct an *asabiyya* environment that is not as unfriendly as that of the Taliban. Of course, this is not so simple, but his recommendations for the West and for Muslims are not bad at all. I do question though whether the West can really pressure Muslim governments to clean up their acts. His description of the things that the West can do to help seems vague, although the intention good. On page 160, he states that "our world has the capacity and the resources to tackle other pressing problems that we face, such as hunger and disease. We should do no less in response to ethnic and religious violence" (Ahmed 160). Like I said, this is all well said, but there is going to need to be some more dialogue and thinking about how the West can influence the Middle East

without involving itself dangerously or without the Muslim countries viewing intervention by the West as a clash of civilizations or some sort of new imperialism.

Islam Under Siege provides a frightening prospect of a Muslim society that may not recover from its hyper-asabiyya. After all, Ibn Khaldun's asabiyya has a pessimistic outlook, especially with such a large young Muslim population growing up in bad economic conditions (Ahmed 81). To a non-Muslim, the promulgation of honor and revenge over compassion and justice seem like a great departure from the principles and pillars of Islam, and I believe this message needs to be spread. Ahmed has developed a way to analyze the instability in the Muslim countries from an Islamic perspective. His long term solution of dialogue and understanding are important themes. Having studied abroad, I too know the importance of intercultural dialogue, and I think this would be the right direction to head. Clearly the West needs to take the first step forward, because it is in a position to do so, and Muslim countries have good reason to be distrustful. Overall though, Ahmed has a very convincing argument, but his recommendations are perhaps too broad. While I myself would not be able to develop his solutions further, I do think that his proposed policies are too broad to implement as are and need to be made more specific.

This book makes for an excellent conversation starter. Multiple times during my reading of the book, I would stop to raise questions with the person sitting across or next to me. It is provocative and could be used for a wider discourse on how to ease tensions between the West and Islamic society. After refinement, I think this book could be the basis for future United Nations Programs that encourage dialogue and perhaps fund education.