

Robert Azzi, Still With His “Ask-A-Muslim Anything” Shtick (Part Three)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Question #8C: “You said that Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia provided inner peace and a sense of security? Where apostates and homosexuals can be decapitated? Where the school textbooks preach hatred of Jews and Christians, where the Shi’a are denounced as Infidels? Where women can’t drive, or work alongside men, and are constantly under the thumb of a male relative?”

Azzi (a sudden hard look of displeasure passes over his features, but swiftly disappears):

I was talking about Islam. You want me to talk about Saudi Arabia, and not even about Saudi Arabia, but about the most far-out of extremists in Saudi Arabia. Those extremist clerics – you’ve heard of the “religious police” or mutawwa? – are a holdover from the past. They are not Saudi Arabia’s future. They do not even represent Saudi Arabia today, which is changing in ways you wouldn’t believe. Just look at the new heir-apparent, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He’s only 33, a sign of real changes to come, as he will replace the King, who is now 81. The Saudi royal family is moving ahead, becoming more open to the world – I mean, the Saudi princes and princesses have all studied abroad, and they are possibly the best-travelled royal family in the world – though well aware that it has to be careful about changing things so fast that an armed opposition might develop among the religious fanatics, especially if whipped up by certain clerics. They are determined to make progress. The foreign media like to

beat up on Saudi Arabia – it’s easy to do, just stick with that narrative about “Wahhabism” and depict the Saudi royals as frozen in time, unable to change. But if you look just at Saudi women, they have been clamoring for the right to drive, even staging drive-ins. In the old days, they would have quietly accepted their fate. Not anymore. Now thanks to the Crown Prince, Saudi women drive everywhere. Before, women did not have the right to vote, but in 2015, Saudi women for the first time could vote in local elections and be appointed to the Consultative Assembly that advises the royal family. That’s a big step forward. But you know – we hear practically nothing in our own media about how much Saudi society is changing. And right now, of course, the news is all about Khashoggi.

As for the Saudis funding some conservative Muslim groups, it is true that in the past, the Saudis have supported some Salafi mosques and madrasas and imams. Salafism is the movement of Muslims who wish to return the practice of Islam to the traditions of the first Muslims, the forefathers (salaf). But “Salafism” is purely religious in nature; it does not imply any particular politics.

Salafism was and is primarily a movement about belief and practice, and not about political power. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is determined to infiltrate governments, schools, workplaces, in order to push for rule by the Brotherhood, in the hope ultimately of establishing a global Islamic state. Now that idea terrifies the Saudi ruling family. They are very much against the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi royals have a lot to lose if Saudi Arabia were ever to become part of a “global Islamic state,” because they would then be sharing their oil wealth not with 22 million Saudis, but with 1.6 billion Muslims. And the Saudi royal family would no longer control its own territory in Arabia; that territory would now be part of that global Islamic state, to be run by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a mass Islamic movement.

And it's not just the Brotherhood. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS also want the return of a single Islamic state, ruled by a caliph. If you were a Saudi, would you want that?

So when you are told that Saudi Arabia is a supporter of dangerous Muslim groups, you can point out that the Saudis support, though with much less enthusiasm than before, Salafis whose aims are not political but a return to the Islam as practiced by the earliest Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood, the most widespread and powerful pan-Islamic group, is overtly political, working for a global Islamic state, but it is least popular in Saudi Arabia. What country is doing the most today to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood? It's Saudi Arabia. They're the ones who are leading the Gulf Cooperation Council to put pressure on Qatar, the main financial supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, to end that support. It's the Saudis who insist that Qatar also close down the Al Jazeera channel, which promotes the Muslim Brotherhood, and remains financially dependent on Qatar. Saudi Arabia is the chief enemy of the Brotherhood, and always will be. And of course, Al-Qaeda and ISIS regard the Saudis as the enemy because they are too close to the Americans. And it's true – the Saudis are close allies of America, and have been ever since King Abdul Aziz met President Roosevelt on the U.S.S. Quincy in 1945. Think about what's happening right now – Iran is America's archenemy, and who is doing the most to fight Iran? It's Saudi Arabia, though it gets little thanks for fighting the Iran-backed forces in Yemen.

Voice from the audience: "That's fascinating. I had no idea that the Saudis were against the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. I'm so grateful to you, Dr. Azzi, for taking us through this Middle Eastern labyrinth."

Azzi:

Well, I'm not a doctor of anything. **I'm just a proud Muslim and a proud citizen of New Hampshire and a proud American.** But

I'm glad if I've been of some help. The politics of the Muslim Middle East, and especially in the Arab Gulf, can be quite confusing. It's taken me quite a while to understand the complexities myself.

And as to that other matter raised by an earlier questioner about the treatment of apostates and homosexuals, do I think apostates and homosexuals should be executed? Of course not. And neither do my Saudi friends, including some who are members of the Saudi royal family. I think if you look, you'll see that the number of executions has gone way down in recent years. But the royals who want to do away with such executions altogether – and there are many – have to move slowly, because of the possible reaction of the clerical establishment. I'm sure you'll see amazing changes in Saudi society in the next decade. All those Saudis, men and women, who have studied in the West, are returning home with ideas that are very different from those clerics. And under this dynamic Crown Prince, soon to be king, I'm sure you will see more rapid changes.

I'm very hopeful about the future of Saudi Arabia. I've been thinking about going out there one last time, and taking photographs of Saudi Arabia four decades after my first portfolio – what has changed, in the skyline of the cities of Riyadh and Jiddah, what the new universities look like, the building boom in hotels for pilgrims in Mecca, which architectural purists deplore, but which I'd like to see for myself and take some photographs. You know, if millions of people come on the hajj, you've got to have a place for them to stay. The Saudis have knocked down some old structures to put up new ones to handle the hajj traffic; they are just being practical. I doubt if I'll be around to photograph the cities planned by the Crown Prince, including that new economic city, NEOM, on which the Saudis are going to spend \$500 billion. What incredible vision he shows.

Next question.

9. Mr. Azzi, you have written, and I quote: **“In the wake of 9/11, America had a choice: either demonize and attempt to disenfranchise from the global community one-sixth of humanity known as Muslims, or respond, engage, educate and forge partnerships with peace-loving peoples in order to isolate, delegitimize and destroy the criminals that executed such violence.”** And then you wrote: **“The Bush administration chose the first path.”** Do you really think that America has been trying to “demonize and attempt to disenfranchise from the global community one-sixth of humanity”? We have, after all, endless statements, including many by President Bush himself, that do not demonize but celebrate Islam, time after time. I’d like to just read a handful of them, if you don’t mind.

Azzi: “No, of course I don’t, it’s fine, go right ahead.”

Questioner 9: Here are just a few:

“America treasures the relationship we have with our many Muslim friends, and we respect the vibrant faith of Islam which inspires countless individuals to lead lives of honesty, integrity, and morality. This year, may Eid also be a time in which we recognize the values of progress, pluralism, and acceptance that bind us together as a Nation and a global community. By working together to advance mutual understanding, we point the way to a brighter future for all.”

“Islam brings hope and comfort to millions of people in my country, and to more than a billion people worldwide. Ramadan is also an occasion to remember that Islam gave birth to a rich civilization of learning that has benefited mankind.”

“Some of the comments that have been uttered about Islam do not reflect the sentiments of my government or the sentiments of most Americans. Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion, a religion that respects others. Ours is a country based upon tolerance and we welcome people of all faiths in America.”

“We see in Islam a religion that traces its origins back to God’s call on Abraham. We share your belief in God’s justice, and your insistence on man’s moral responsibility. We thank the many Muslim nations who stand with us against terror. Nations that are often victims of terror, themselves.”

“Islam is a vibrant faith. Millions of our fellow citizens are Muslim. We respect the faith. We honor its traditions. Our enemy does not. Our enemy doesn’t follow the great traditions of Islam. They’ve hijacked a great religion.”

“Islam is a faith that brings comfort to people. It inspires them to lead lives based on honesty, and justice, and compassion.”

Azzi: “Well, I can’t disagree with any of that. But I think you’ve been cherry-picking what George Bush said. He also said some pretty awful things about Islam.”

Questioner 9: “No, I don’t think so. I didn’t go looking for favorable statements about Islam from President Bush. I just googled ‘President Bush’ and ‘Islam’ and saved whatever turned up – mostly these were related to messages at Eid al-Fitr. But I couldn’t find a single statement by Bush, or anyone in the Bush administration that ‘demonized Islam.’ Or that even criticized any aspect of Islam. And as for the second part of your sentence, about the ‘attempt to disenfranchise one-sixth of humanity, the Muslims’ – I just don’t think that stands up to scrutiny. Wasn’t the whole point of the invasion of Afghanistan to get rid of both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban that were terrorizing that country and the peaceful Muslims? And what about the Presidential election in Afghanistan in 2014, that was declared by international observers to be both free and fair? That led to a peaceful transfer of power for the first time in the history of Afghanistan? Wasn’t that the same goal in Iraq, to get rid of the despot Saddam Hussein, so that the people of Iraq, the Muslim people of Iraq, would no longer live in terror, but could safely hold democratic elections?

Remember all those people holding up their purple thumbs? What America wanted, and still wants, is to encourage the spread of democracy, of enfranchisement, all over the Muslim world. Do you disagree?"

Azzi: "I can't get into details, obviously, at this point, as we're winding down, that I think support my position – it's been a long evening and I know that many of you must be tired – but I'd be glad to talk to you one-on-one about it, just send me an email at theother.azzi@gmail.com and we'll meet. And yes, I do think that ever since Bush we've seen American administrations generally quite hostile to Islam, unable to distinguish between the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, and the handful of sociopaths who try to claim Islam as an excuse for their intolerable acts."

Questioner 9: "I've learned a lot this evening. Real food for thought. And I'd like to mention how much I personally value both your candor and your kindness in coming out tonight to inform us of things we need to know, and that the mainstream media just won't tell us. I won't say it's a conspiracy, exactly, but I do sometimes wonder why we have so much coverage of the Islamic 'extremists' who represent only themselves, and so little coverage of mainstream Muslims who in order to get their message out about the real Islam have had to set up these Ask-a-Muslim-Anything Events. **It's been a wonderful evening, and I think I speak for all of us when I say it's been one of the most eye-opening meetings I've ever experienced.**"

Sustained applause.

Azzi: "Thank you very much. And thank you all for coming. I hope you have learned something, as I always do, from these meetings. But before we break up, and since you've mentioned food for thought, I just wanted to let you know that, as my Lebanese grandmother always used to tell visitors, 'it is not permissible for anyone to leave my house hungry. I have to

feed you.’ So in the next room, I have some Lebanese specialties that you might want to try. Manakeesh, falafel, tabbouleh, fatoush, baba gannoush. And of course, baklava and mamoul with pistachios for dessert. The daughter of one of my Hezbollah friends – yes, I know, ‘Hezbollah,’ but please don’t believe everything you hear about that group, which from long experience I know is only trying to defend the Shi’a in Lebanon and now Syria from both Israel and ISIS – who is spending the summer here in New Hampshire, made the pastries. So they’re authentically Lebanese. Please stay a bit longer, and let’s break bread – or *manakeesh* – together.”

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