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Debate

Islam and the left

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Salma Yaqoob is a founder member of Respect and a leading Muslim anti-war activist in Britain. She stood as a Respect candidate in Birmingham coming second with a vote of 27%. Here she was speaking at the SWP's Marxism event in London a few days after the London bombings on July 7, - an event which was naturally dominating politics at that point - in the session on Muslims and the left.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sy1.jpg>]

Salma Yaqoob

"It is really odd time for me to be at this meeting. I thought we would be celebrating all the fantastic achievements of the anti-war movement and Respect we have had over the last year. But, of course, the recent bombings in London have changed that.

As I watched the events unfold on my TV I recalled how I had felt on September 11 2001 watching similar events unfold. And in comparing my reaction to both situations I realized how much I have changed - a change in me that cannot be separated from your impact on me.

After September 11 2001 I did not know where to put my fear. I felt a deep pessimism about the future. Among my friends we started discussing whether as Muslims it would still be safe for us to stay in Britain. And if we were to go, what other country could we go to? Even though I considered myself a relatively integrated person, being a psychologist, having gone to university and having various non-Muslim friends, I started to question how many non-Muslims really understand us, trust us, would defend us? While everybody grieved for the victims of 9/11 somehow my grief, as a Muslim, did not count as much as the grief of a non-Muslim. I knew I would be forced to condemn the bombings again and again in a way that my fellow citizens would not.

After the 7/7 bombings, there were many similarities in the manner in which the Muslim community was demonized as after 9/11 but there was one important difference. This time I did not feel alone. This time I did not feel the same crushing pessimism. This time I knew that there would be tens of thousands of people who would understand that if our government is explodes bombs in other people's countries, we increase the likelihood that somebody explode bombs on our streets in retaliation. The fact that the Guardian opinion poll showed that two-thirds of Londoners saw a direct connection between the London bombings and the invasion of Iraq, despite Blair's desperate denials otherwise, is testimony to the work of anti-war activists in shaping and informing the political culture in this country. The fact that the tide of racism in the aftermath of the bombing has not been as bad as it could have been is testimony to the work of the anti-war movement in helping to strengthen anti-racist barriers in this country. All that, and more besides, is testimony to the work of ordinary anti-war campaigners up and down the country. Because of the work between the left and the Muslim community in the anti-war movement you have given me hope again and I thank you for it.

I have spoken many times about the relief I felt when I came across socialists campaigning against the war. It marked the beginning of a new journey for me. But that journey has not been without its ups and downs.

Very early on, when the Stop the war coalition was established, I was confronted by socialists who factionalised in opposition to Muslim participation in the anti-war movement. They would say "we can't have Salma Yaqoob as chair because she has a head scarf,"; that the very presence of identifiable Muslims in prominent positions in the Stop the war Coalition somehow undermined its inclusive and secular nature; that the experience of Iranian revolution proved that Muslims and the left could nor should ever work together. I could not understand their reaction. I though what

has Iran got to do with me? Why are they so hung up about a piece of cloth on my head? Why can they only see Muslims as one reactionary monolithic bloc?

These attitudes were overcome but they did cause damage. Many of the Muslims who came to the first anti-war meetings left when they saw people standing up and saying that they did not want to work with Muslims. They said if you do not want to work with Muslims we do not want to work with you. That was a serious setback, and there are still those perceptions of what it means to work with the left around in the Muslim communities.

I was reminded of that experience just last week I happened bump into Tariq Ramadan. He started telling me about what is happening with Muslims and the left in France - and I really could not believe it. The ideological arguments that are being put forward by people who are not marginal but - very much at the centre of our global movement. People like Bernard Cassen, who is one of the directors of Le Monde Diplomatique, and honorary president of ATTAC. He has actually conducted an attack on the SWP and on Respect saying that the left is compromising its most fundamental principles by working with Muslims in the way that we have in Britain. Basically saying that we do not want to infect the European side of our movement with the British experience.

I want to address this because I think it is really important that we are alive to the debates across Europe. This one-dimensional presentation of Muslims as a reactionary, monolithic bloc has to be challenged. Like every community the Muslim community is a mosaic of different communities, experiences, political viewpoints. For example when I stood as a Respect candidate in Birmingham the recent general election the bulk of my political opponents were Muslims. There was a Liberal Democrat Muslim candidate, an independent Muslim candidate, and a Conservative Muslim candidate all standing against me. I was also the one who was most attacked by the Muslim extremists who were going around with leaflets at the Mosque and in vans with loudspeakers saying I was no longer a Muslim because I work with atheists and this is haram. On the other hand I was subject to attack from another group of very anxious Muslims who, because they were feeling scared and vulnerable - and understandably so because that is the reality we are living in - are desperate to be accepted by the mainstream. They want to take cover under a big umbrella like the Labour Party and they say people like me are increasing the threat against the Muslim community by speaking out in the way that I do.

For example, on the same Saturday that I met Tariq I was speaking as a panellist at a meeting in Oxford University. It was with mainly Muslim panellists, and I was vilified in that room by the other panellists - not the audience who turned out to be very sympathetic - but prominent Labour and Liberal Democrat panellists, all Muslims, saying that I am leading Muslims down a cul-de-sac. That working with these extremists - i.e. leftists - is not what Muslims should be doing right now. We are in enough trouble as it is. So we should not ally ourselves to these other marginal people. I said yes I know we are marginal and they are marginal in terms of conventional politics but our values are not marginal. Our values of peace and social justice are held by the vast majority of people and it is on these values that we can unite. And anyway, all principled political positions invariably start off as being marginal, on the outside, before gaining wider acceptance. The opposition to Bush's war on terror started with his plans to attack Afghanistan and we were very marginal in our opposition. It was not a very popular position to adopt! But from that politically principled opposition we laid the foundation for a huge global anti-war movement.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/muslims1b.jpg>]

The challenge in building stronger social movements and political alternatives is that we never lose sight of what unites us and I believe people like Cassen and others on the French left have become blinded to this elementary point. Our movement across Europe will be strengthened not weakened the more the left ditches some preconceived notions about Muslims and develops the political clarity and courage to engage with Muslims. I think we have made some important steps in this regard in Britain which others could learn from. Tragically, I believe it was the failure of the French left to do likewise that was one of the most important reasons why their anti-war movement did not reach the scale of Britain, Italy, Spain or Greece. I don't buy the argument that the fact the French did not send troops was an adverse factor in building a large anti-war movement because that could also be said of Greece yet their movement

was among the most impressive in Europe. One of the key issues was a lack of political clarity on how to build principled alliances with Muslims.

When I talk to Muslims I am very conscious that I have to take people with me. To do that effectively you obviously have to relate to people where they are at. And that means being able to talk from a paradigm that they can relate to and I relate to. It means digging deep into Quranic sources, about the Prophet's life, about solidarity, about justice, because they are all there. Just like in any ideology or religion you have various schisms and interpretations - and as I understand it, it is the same with the left!

Seeing the centrality of the fight for justice to my faith was central to me becoming involved in broader political struggle. The more I read the Quran the more convinced I became that not only was this something I wanted to do politically but something as a Muslim I have to do. That it is not a compromise of my principles but an expression of my principles to work with non-Muslims in this manner. That the most important dividing line is those who stand up against oppression and those who endorse oppression, whether within our family, our community or society as a whole. You are either on one side of this line or the other.

The irony is this that those people who consider themselves as such pure Muslims that we cannot work with atheists have actually have far more in common with those people on the left who consider themselves such pure secularists that they do not want us believers polluting them. So I think that being dogmatic is not just the privilege of religious people.

What is dangerous is that if we put these barriers in our minds, if we become these puritanical ideologues, we will miss the point. Because right now, at the heart of the neo-liberal agenda, one of the things that allows it to advance is the attack on Muslims and Islamaphobia that justifies it.

We cannot ignore that reality. So if the left falls into this trap and gets caught up in this argument about whether we can work with non-secular people - when in reality those are the people being oppressed right now - it will fail. If we want our movement to be strong, if we want to create the biggest force possible against the real enemy right now - then we have to have a united basis for it. This means religious people non-believing people acting together on a clear political platform - I am not talking about a mushy "lets hold hands together" kind of approach.

So now I find myself in the curious position of having more in common with atheist, socialist activists than with some of some of my own Muslim brothers and sisters. But for me it is not a compromise, for me it is very much an expression of what I understand to be Islamic notions of justice. If you want to call it socialist internationalism and I call it Islamic notions of brotherhood and sisterhood I don't care - as long as it means that we work in solidarity with those who are oppressed around the world.

And you know when I stand here and say I believe that another world is possible I am not just talking about heaven, I am talking about the one right here and now.

I am proud to say that I am one of the founders of Respect - and it is an interesting experiment. I did not know myself where it would go - I just felt that we had to do something like this. I knew I had more in common with trade unionists, with those people fighting for the environment, with those people standing up for working peoples rights, with those people who campaigns incessantly against the war, than those who claimed to speak in my name in the Tory Party, or the Labour Government, or those wishy-washy Liberal Democrat people. This is what Respect has been about. It's is for an alternative to the politics of imperialism and neo-liberalism. It has been clear that this is our commonality and what we put aside we put aside in a very conscious way.

This experiment I feel has born fruit. Sometimes it means going into the unknown - and what we are creating is a bit unknown. I cannot tell you exactly how it is all going to pan out. But what we should not do is say that the socialist ideal state is that and the Islamic ideal state is this therefore these two can never start working together, therefore Muslims and socialists here do not work. I don't think that is the right approach. And I think by going into the unknown with the clear and principled basis, by stressing our common ground, we start to build real relationships and go forward to forge a real political alternative to the politics of war and privatisation. That is the basis in which we operate in Respect and I believe we have established an important model of political engagement.

I am going to end with a quote from the Quran: it says "Stand up for justice even if it means going against yourself and your family, be they rich or poor".

What I read into that verse is that it is easy to be just with those people who are like you. The real test is standing up for people who are different from you and may not necessarily believe what you believe. And I hear an echo of that sentiment when I read what Lenin wrote in 1902 when he said that when people stand up for an increase in wages they are good trade unionists, but when they stand up to prevent Jews from being attacked then they are true socialists.

Our solidarity is our strength.

Thank you very much."