

To offend and to be offended

WEAKNESS: The narrative of grievance is very much pronounced in the Muslim world today



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WE have seen this before and should expect things to continue — the Charlie Hebdo and the Salman Rushdies. The provocateurs will be around ad nauseam. I am not directly referring to the recent *Charlie Hebdo* incident. I refer to a cover story by *Newsweek* — much relevant now but written before *Charlie Hebdo* made the headlines.

The printing press was not a lovable technology during The Ot-

toman and Mughal empires, and also in Egypt two-and-a-half centuries after Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type.

We now witness that the good old print media has induced many expressions of rage and anger amongst Muslims in the age of smartphones and YouTube. The protests that make the headlines, according to Husain Haqqani, are the function of politics, not religion. It is a function of modern-era politics.

"It started during Western colonial rule, with Muslim politicians seeking issues to mobilise their constituents. Secular leaders focused on opposing foreign domination, and Islamists emerged to claim that Islam is not merely a religion but also a political ideology," reasoned Haqqani, who was Pakistan's ambassador to Washington from 2008 to 2011, and then professor of In-

ternational Relations at Boston University and a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

Commenting in its announced last American print edition in October of 2012, *Newsweek* with the cover story titled "The Muslim Paradox: Why do they always blame the West for their weaknesses?" Haqqani reminded Muslims to look into their own weaknesses and not to blame the West for all their ills and sufferings.

We often hear statements from our politicians, intellectuals and the ulama saying and believing that Muslims were weak "because we were colonised". He asked: Is it not the other logic — that "Muslim lands were colonised because they had become weak?"

Muslim reaction to *Charlie Hebdo's* satire on Prophet Muhammad perpetuated the ummah's narrative of Islam, and of Islam being under siege. Haqqani puts the blame on demands by Islamist politics in recent times. These have helped perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes of Muslims as being prone to anger and susceptible to violence.

The target of the orchestrators of the protests are instead looking for ways in which to mobilise Muslims against the West.

Haqqani cited that an "early prototype of these mass-mobilisation campaign" centred on *Rangeela Rasool* (Playboy Prophet), a salacious version of Prophet Muhammad's life published in British India in 1927. The book was hardly a bestseller.

It went mostly unnoticed until Muslim politicians encountered it two years later and complained. The British authorities tried the book's publisher, Rajpal, only to acquit him. Agitation by Muslim groups encouraged a young illiterate carpenter by the name of Ilmuddin to stab the publisher to death in Lahore. Ilmuddin was given the title of *ghazi* ("warrior for the faith").

Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naquib Mahfouz's *Children of Gabalawi* — an allegorical novel in Arabic that allegedly belittled Islam, published in 1959, did not become the target of significant protests until 30 years later, after he had won the prize for literature.

As in the case with these books, also Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, they only increase our attention to what was published. Such books, targeted for protests over the years, ironically, are available to this day. It has failed to silence insults against Islam and Muslims.

There is nothing in Islamic tradition that requires Muslims to set things on fire or commit suicide, terrorise or massacre every time the

faith is insulted. The narrative of grievance is very much pronounced in the Muslim world today.

Interestingly Muslims have placed themselves as the underdog in popular, academic and policy discourses. We often encounter expressions of seminar themes or titles of papers and books such as *Islam and the Challenge of the West*, *Islam and the Challenge of Information Technology*, and *Muslims and Modern Education*.

The Muslim world has spent centuries in ascendance before Western influence arose, and Muslim power declined. But Western imperialism is far from benign. At a recent international forum on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims by the Western media in Putrajaya recently, I denounced any assertions of media conspiracy. Instead, Muslims must use the new media to enlighten the world as much as possible on Islam and the Muslims.

Caricatures of Islam and its civilisation have been around from the time of the Crusades.

Haqqani made it clear that the current weakness of the Muslim world is not entirely the fault of Western colonialism and postcolonial machinations. Outrage and resentment do not help to understand the causes and remedies of the Muslim situation. The narrative of grievance has to find a way out.

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