

## Islamic Renaissance in the West

### An Interview with Murad Hoffman \*

By Hossam Tammam

*Staff writer- IslamOnline. net.*

"I can see that because I'm standing with one leg in the orient and with the other one in the Occident that's why I understand both worlds sufficiently well to explain them to each other, so often when ram in the Muslim world I explain to them the west and in the west I explain Islam." This is how Murad Hoffman the famous Muslim German thinker reflects his unique situation, being exposed to different knowledge and experience.



*\* Can we consider September eleventh events as a turning point and a beginning of another era? And do you think that there is a suitable Islamic project, dealing with the western mentality, by which we can confront the ramification of such events?*

I don't believe really that eleventh of September was such a monumental change. It was very important for the American mentality just like Peart Harbor have been for instance. In Germany

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\* Murad Wilfried Hoffman was Germany's ambassador to Algeria and Morocco between 1987-94 and was earlier Director of Information for NATO at Brussels. He embraced Islam in 1980. He received his education at Union College in New York and did his Masters degree in German Law in Munich and took his doctorate from Harvard. His first book on Islam was *Diary of a German Muslim* (1990). Second book *Islam: the Alternative* raised protests in Germany and he was dubbed a fundamentalist by Leftists.

Here Hoffman discusses with Islam Online his views and concerns about various intellectual and practical problematic contexts of both the common grounds and the differences between the East and the West especially after September eleventh. He tries to reassert the opportunities and challenges of Islam and Muslims in the western societies, drawing the difference between these western societies.

we had monumental events like the end of World War II which was an enormous catastrophe. The Japanese had events like the atomic attacks and yet after some time the world gets back to normal. I also think that this will be the fate of eleventh of September; it will be an important date in the history books, but the world will settle down to normal and as far as Islam is concerned eleventh of September has in the long run been an advantage to Islam in as much as more people than ever are seeking information about Islam, all books on Islam were sold out within 14 days. In Germany, a translation of the Quran which I edited sold 40,000 times within a year which goes to show that the shock effect can translate into more knowledge about Islam in the long run and if we move out of the present hysteria, we may see more appreciation of Islam after all.

*\* But at least those events have had serious effects on Muslims, how do you evaluate these effects?*

Of course I'm living these effects. I encounter suspicion, when you are law abiding, even then you are suspected of being a potential terrorist. When you travel to the United States, you are being treated as never as before; you have to wait for hours for your suitcase and you are obviously under suspicion. But the Muslims in America reasserted their approach, they even organized after eleventh of September the first central meeting of Muslims in America, the so called ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) meeting. They organized that for the first time in Washington to make a point and 42000 Muslims came to Washington, most of them very young and most of the very young women wearing *Hijab*. That was the answer of the Muslims; not to fight but to stand up for what they believe and to be assertive, not defensive.

*\* In your opinion, how can you see the Islamic project and its approaches towards the West?*

*D'awa* can not be centralized. Effective *D'awa* can only be carried out locally because if somebody speaks for Islam with a foreign accent, Islam will automatically be treated as a foreign thing, not as a universal thing. Also you have to know how people think, that means you have to go through the same education they had in order

to know the pitfalls. You have to know the history of the people because they have collective memories. Only if we know all that you can be an effective *D'uua*. To give you an example, we get often Islamic books from Pakistan or from India, their English is faulty, their paper is ban, the binding is awful, there are many printing mistakes. That alone disqualifies the books, people won't even touch them because they are used good paper, good binding, perfect printing and it is little things like that disqualifies a book that otherwise would be worthwhile reading. This is cultural. This is the answer to that question.

*\* There are repeated calls from different sides to the Muslims to renew their discourses and projects, what do you think about that?*

Every new generation of Muslims has to reconvert, you can not inherit a religion. The Western German poet called Goethe who put it very well, he said: "You have to acquire your inheritance in order to boss it". And that means every generation has to go back to Quran and Sunnah again and again in order to make it relevant against the background of its own problematic context.

*\* Some people believe that the achievements or the Islamic intellectual thought and jurisprudence so far has not interacted effectively with humanity and the world at large. Being an intellectual who is Muslim and Western, what is your opinion?*

I agree with that statement fully. The problem is that the Muslim world has not developed with corresponds to orientalism in the West. In the West there are specialists for Islam who know a lot about Islam, who speak Arabic and Persian (I mean Farsi) and Turkish, this is the minimum of what they have to learn, so the West is equipped to understand Islam from the inside. There is no such thing as accidentalism in the Muslim world. You find very few people who have a command of western languages plus western history plus western philosophy plus Christianity for instance in all its details and that is part of the function. I can see that because I'm standing with one leg in the orient and with the other one in the Occident and I understand both world sufficiently well to explain them to each other, so often when, I'm in the Muslim world I explain to them the west and in the west I explain Islam.

*\* Do you think that there is an Islamic absence in the respect of engaging with human international issues and problems? For example, with the international anti-globalization movement, what we have to do in order to readdress the situation?*

I think the Palestinian issue is central in this respect. It is true that the policies of Israel against Palestinians and the support given to it by the United States are highly criticized in most of Europe and even in America itself. There's a growing feeling among Americans that Washington is no longer run by Americans but by Zionists and basically from Israel and this makes these people very unhappy, so there may be a growing numbers of people who are against this Bush policy towards Israel. And you are definitely right, what happens in Chechnya, in Kashmir, in Algeria, in Pakistan, in the United Nations Security Council is dealt with a double standard. United Nations resolutions against Israel are never applied but United Nations resolutions against any of the Muslim countries are immediately applied. And that's why one of my books I wrote a chapter called: "Blond blue eyed and other human rights" meaning, I said, human rights are blond and blu eyed. .

And the Muslim world is mostly absent; the same was true in Bosnia. Who finally interfered massively in favor of the Muslims in Bosnia and in Kosovo? It was the west; it was not the Muslim world. Why is this so? Why can we not get our act together? It is first of all, I think, because the Muslim world has been divided by colonialism into nations that now behave like independent nations and not like the Ummah. Everybody has a flag and a dictator and that is tragic. If the Muslim people themselves would count, they would get their act together. It is the governments that don't permit it.

*\* Many may think that Muslims in the west are living on the production of the intellect and jurisprudence made in the East. What is the reason for this and when do you think there will be an independent Islamic Fiqn and intellect and culture which are the production of the west?*

I fully deny the assumption you made. There is much more intellectual Islamic life in the west in the East. More serious books

on Islam are being published in English than in Arabic. We have very productive centers of Islamic institution of thought in Washington led by Taha Gaber Al-Elwany, he's an Azharite. We have another one in Los Anglos led by Fathy Othman, Azharite. We have one in London led by Zaky Badawy, Azharite. I'm writing book reviews, every year about 20 books; meaning I read about 4000 pages of Islamic books each year for the so called Muslim world book review which is published in England in Markfield where there is a wonderful production is likely to be essential for the development of Islam in the Muslim world. I think the Muslims in America and in Europe will be the leaders for the intellectual revitalization of the Muslims in the East.

*\* But at the same time we believe that the west is still depending on the east in terms of intellect and thought. Even the names you have just mentioned like Elwany, Badawi and Fathy Othman, they were reared and they started their life in the east. Besides that the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) is still headed by Al-Qaradawi -and Mawlawi. The question is: is the infrastructure for westerner Islamic thought and intellect being built in the west?*

I think so indeed and even the three people mentioned are so much influenced by their being in west. This has fruitful repercussions on their production, on their thinking, on their approach.

*\* How do you see the future of Muslims in the west especially after the eleventh of September tragic events?*

This can not be answered without distinguishing between those parts of the west which is mainly atheistic and where the Christian church is no longer a major player and those countries where people are still religious. Take the United States; the United States is a religious country. You can not be the President of the United States without going to some church.

In Europe, it is the opposite, the German chancellor, he is a professing atheist. And the majority of the intellectuals in Europe are non believers. Now, it is easier for Muslims to deal with believers than with non believers.

The second elements is: who is the majority of Muslims? In Germany: It is Turks, in France: it is North Africans, in England: it is Indo-Pakistanis. And that makes a big difference for each of these countries. The Turks for instance came without knowing any German while the North Africans; they knew French before they came to France and the Indo-Pakistanis knew English before they came to England so they had a head start.

Secondly, India is so far away that these people immediately identify with burden. The North Africans identify with France because they are political refugees, they don't want to go back. The Turks however want to go back because they came for economic reasons, not for political reasons. The picture is different in every country.

Now, the most important difference is in favor of Muslims in America. The Muslims in Europe all came as workers, unskilled workers and therefore, socially, they started from the bottom and this you can still notice. In America, Muslims came as students from the entire Muslim world and they all went to become doctors, engineers, lawyers ... with the result that the Muslim population in America has the highest ratio of academically trained people in America, more than the Jews.

*\* Having retired from civil service, are you writing your memoris? What is new in your production? Are you writing special books? I am 72 years age and I have written ten books on Islam, I think that is sufficient. My diary you would find in the book: "rehla ela Makka"; (My journey to Macca) But I do write articles for "Islamic Studies" in Islamabad, for the "American Journal for Islamic Studies" in Washington, for "Encounters" in England and I'm writing for an Islamic nrespaper in Germany. We have an Islamic newspaper.*

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