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Middle East: Playground of Imperial Strategies
As tensions build in the Middle East, Ali Jawad explains what is at stake for Muslims
Believers are brethren

I

It has been several decades now since sociologists forecasted the decline of religion and the disappearance of religious rituals, proclaiming the dawn of a new secular age. Yet the reverse has happened. Every year over two million Muslims converge on Makkah to perform the world’s largest and most impressive annual religious ritual, the Hajj. Their number is what the arena of the ritual can contain to the brink, burdened unassailable by quotas, with millions being forced to remain behind every year. The 2013 Hajj is expected to fall on around October 13-18. In this issue ‘journeying to God’ by Alexander Khaelel encapsulates the essence of Hajj within the concept of ‘ubudiyah (human servitude to God) expressed in the performance of an act whose spiritual significance is not directly visible to our intellect. The ritual we perform during the Hajj mirrors the actions of the last Prophet of God Muhammad[1], who revived the true spirit of this Abrahamic ritual made obligatory to us by the Quranic revelation.

For many this year’s pilgrimage will be their first, adding to the expected excitement of this period. There are also those who revisit Makkah. There is no limit on how many times one may perform the Hajj. Those who have the means return to relive its captivating experience motivated by a variety of reasons.

Reflecting on their experience, those who have been there confirm that the Hajj has involved some kind of spiritual reawakening regardless of the fact that they were seeking it or not. In 1964, Malcolm X broke from the heterodox Nation of Islam and performed the Hajj. In a letter from Makkah, he wrote: ‘There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world… We were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white. What I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-examine much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions’.

Researchers at the Harvard Kennedy School conducted a study on the effect of Hajj on pilgrims in 2008. They found an increased sense of unity in a variety of ethnic groups and Islamic sects, and also positive changes in attitudes towards women. This increased sense of unity within the Islamic world did not translate into hostility towards non-Muslims. These changes were attributed to exposure and interaction with pilgrims from around the world, rather than religious instruction.

Such studies support the opinion of visionary Islamic leaders who have underlined the importance of utilising the socio-political dimension of Hajj and the role it can play as a place of convergence for Muslims to discuss and resolve issues related to Muslims and the Islamic World.

It is undeniable that the world of Islam is facing some of its greatest ever challenges and that divisions exprssed in the form of violence are a real threat that need to be addressed as matter of urgency.

It is not a coincidence that Prophet Muhammad[2] in a well-known sermon - delivered during the Farewell Hajj - reminded the Muslims that: ‘Believers are brethren. Their blood has equal value. They are a single hand and power against others. The promise of each of them is like that of all, hence binding.”

The above words oblige us to actualise this directive and what better place to start than the very same place where they were spoken.

In this issue Ali Jawad analyses the current condition in the Middle East explaining the complex geopolitical situation that requires a degree of awareness on our part to avert a disaster caused by wrong and uninformed actions. He concludes with an exhortation which carries a feeling that he suggests we should all have: “If we extract no other lesson from the Divine pilgrimage this year except the need to dispel ignorant hatreds from our hearts, and to fill them instead with sentiments of brotherhood and shared concern, then one feels we will have made important leaps toward resolving our gravest problems”.

On behalf of the Islam Today magazine, I take this opportunity to wish all our readers a happy Eid al-Adha:

Amir De Martino
Chief Editor

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Footnotes:

1. (Qur’an: 3:97)
2. (Qur’an: 2:125-126)
A British soldier fired a volley of bullets into the ‘twitching’ bodies of Iraqis after a firefight, a public inquiry has heard.

The Al-Sweady Inquiry is examining allegations that British troops mistreated and unlawfully killed Iraqi detainees after the Battle of Danny Boy in southern Iraq in May 2004.

Former army Private Duncan Aston told the inquiry he also saw a fellow private punch and kick a detainee and other comrades punch and kick a detainee.

He did not report the incidents, because he did not want to ‘grass’ on his friends, he said.

Mr Aston, who was serving with the 2nd Battalion the Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment, said his platoon sergeant demanded his weapon from him, and then opened fire on the bodies.

In a witness statement to the inquiry, Mr Aston - who has since left the Army - described how, after a firefight with wounded Iraqi detainees, he was collecting weapons from dead gunmen in a ditch when he noticed two were ‘twitching’.

‘At the time, I assumed that because they were twitching this meant that there must be some life there,’ he said.

He said the men appeared to be ‘somewhere between life and death’ but looked past the point of first aid.

Mr Aston recalled his platoon sergeant, Paul Kelly approach the ditch ‘looking very angry’ and try to fire at one of the twitching men, but his weapon did not work.

‘He then threw his rifle to the ground and said words to the effect of “give me your weapon”.

Sgt Kelly had seemed ‘worked up’ he said. He had been injured earlier in the tour when he was shot in the finger and he had returned to Iraq after a spell in the UK a lot angrier than he had been before.

He assumed Sgt Kelly wanted to fire his rifle at the bodies, but did not feel he could say no, Mr Aston told the hearing in central London.

‘He put a full magazine of bullets into both bodies that had been twitching but he also fired into the bodies of the other dead gunmen in the ditch.

‘The bodies of the two twitching gunshotned stepped twitching. There was no other reaction from the bodies. They did not make any other noise, they just stopped twitching.’

Sgt Kelly gave the gun back, and the incident was not mentioned between them again, he said.

The Ministry of Defence has denied the allegations, saying bodies handed back to Iraqis were of those who died on the battlefield.

Jews and Muslims work together against far right

Muslim leaders in an area of north-east London have recruited the help of a police-trained ultra-orthodox Jewish neighbourhood patrol to bolster security following attacks on mosques and threats against Muslim communities in the UK by far-right rogue elements.

The initiative, in the Stamford Hill neighbourhood of Hackney, has seen mosques added to a list of local sites watched over by Shomrim, a volunteer organisation that responds to reports of crime, anti-social behaviour and other incidents in the area and calls itself the ‘eyes and ears of the police’.

‘We keep an eye on all the mosques. If we see anything suspicious, we’ll take down a car registration number, report it to the police, keep it for intelligence, log the call and hopefully there won’t be any trouble,’ Chaim Hochhauser, Shomrim’s supervisor, told the press.

Munaf Zeena, chairman of the North London Muslim Community Centre, said the arrangement, under which Shomrim volunteers have also advised the centre on security issues, was prompted by a series of attacks targeting mosques and Muslims since the killing of Lee Rigby, a British soldier, in Woolwich, south London, in May.

Police have also reported an increase in anti-Muslim Hate crimes. ‘The more evidence we have of attacks happening, the more vigilant we need to become,’ Zeena said.

Stamford Hill is an area as diverse as any in London. About 14 percent of the population - approximately 33,000 people – of the wider borough of Hackney is Muslim, according to 2011 census figures, with large and long-settled communities from South Asia and Turkey.

Ian Sharer, a local Liberal Democrat councillor who brought leaders of the community centre and Shomrim together in June, said Jews and Muslims had long ago learned to live side by side.

‘People just get on with their lives, bring their children up, study their own laws, pray to their God,’ Sharer said. ‘People walk side by side to the mosque and the synagogue, and we like to see it’.

Shomrim, modelled on the organisation of the same name in Haredi neighbourhoods of New York, was established in Stamford Hill in 2005 amid local concerns about crime and anti-Semitism.

‘There’s always been trouble. You always got people knocking off their hats. It’s a tough area. You’ve got “murder mile” a few yards away,’ said Sharer, referring to the infamous nearby stretch of road where stabbings and shootings were so common a decade ago that newspapers declared it ‘more dangerous than Soweto’.

‘Shomrim has been patrolling this neighbourhood for many years now and when they pass the mosque they don’t close their eyes,’ he said. ‘But this makes it legitimised and the community knows we are working together. Forget about race, forget about ethnicity, we are living together. And how can we live together without respecting and tolerating each other’s viewpoint, faith and customs?’

Amir Amerat said the Muslim community planned to use Shomrim as a model for its own local volunteer patrol group, with operators handling calls in Urdu and Gujarati.

‘It’s going to take time. We are looking for volunteers and to make in two or three years we will be in a position to set something up,’ he said. ‘In the meantime we work together and we support each other.’

Hochhauser said he welcomed the prospect of a Muslim patrol joining Shomrim on the streets of Stamford Hill. Such a scenario could be beneficial to the Jewish community as well, he added. Because of their strict observance of Shabbat, when many activities are prohibited, Shomrim volunteers can only respond to life-or-death incidents, such as a search for a missing person, on that day.

News
Quebec’s proposed charter of values, calling on Premier Pauline Marois to put an end to ‘politics of division’.

The protest, billed as an inclusive, multicultural event, drew many members of the Muslim and Sikh communities. Others who claimed no religious allegiance also took part.

‘This is a time for all religions to come together for what they believe in,’ said Noman Safdar, a 24-year-old engineer who was holding up the sign.

The plan unveiled earlier has sparked a heated debate. The Parti Quebecois government wants to forbid Quebec’s public employees from wearing conspicuously visible religious symbols - including hijabs, turbans, sarrukkes and larger-than-average crucifixes.

While opinion polls indicate there is some support for the charter, mainly in the province’s outlying regions, opponents have called it discriminatory.

The PQ, which holds a minority in the provincial legislature, contends the move is necessary to ensure the public service presents a neutral face and protects equality between men and women.

For many at the rally, though, the most immediate concern was how such a law would limit their job prospects. Salma Ahmed, a 17-year-old Muslim high school student who wears a hijab, said she doesn’t want her career options to be limited.

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The beast within

Although bullying can take a variety of forms, it is characterised by one key feature – the abuse of power. Sabnum Dharansi highlights how we can guard against it.
online bullying, with organisations like Childline reporting a total of 4,507 complaints about online bullying in 2012-13, up 87 per cent from the previous year. We saw government getting involved to apply pressure on social networking sites to become more responsible and provide safeguards to protect young people from online abuse.

But what is bullying? And can it ever be dealt with? This serious and complex topic is little understood. And it does need to be understood – for the sake of young people like Hannah. For the first thing to know about bullying is that it can happen anywhere and at any age - it’s not just the province of the online world or of young people. There are many definitions of bullying. According to the Tim Field Foundation (bullyingonline.org) “bullying is persistent, unwelcome behaviour, mostly using unwarranted or invalid criticism, nicknicking, fault-finding, also exclusion, isolation, being singled out and treated differently, being shouted at, humiliated, excessive monitoring, having verbal and written warnings imposed, and much more. Bullying at its root is the abuse of power. Whether the action is physical bullying, like kicking or punching, or verbal or written bullying (harassing someone with inappropriate sexual or racial comments or intimidating someone with threats online) or social (excluding someone or gangging up on someone) bullying is essentially the misuse of power.

So why do people behave in this way? What makes people bully others? Are some people more likely to bully than others? In the animal kingdom, naked displays of power are common. Chimpanzees, for example, will fight to establish dominance as the alpha male or the dominant group gets access to the best resources, including sexual partners and the ability to control others. We like to think we human beings are more sophisticated, and we can be so, yet all of us also have the propensity to behave like animals. As the Qur’an says, we have the potential to be higher than the angels or lower than the animals. Part of our nature is raw and instinctual - including the potential for fierceness and savagery. There is a beast within, a beast that would like to crush the competition and that wants to be and respects the ‘top dog’. You can witness this assertion of dominance very clearly in gang behaviour, but also in the nasty put-downs that occur in communities, and even between friends.

So what stops this animal aspect from taking over completely? There is also another side to us – the aspect of us that finds the idea of this base behaviour abhorrent. This higher aspect, in Islamic terminology, is known as the ‘Fitra’. Human beings are born with the ‘Fitra’, natural disposition of the human being, which is inclined from birth to do right and to love God and other people, and that no one will attack them.

This Fitra within us tells us that we love justice, friendship, love and peace. There is within us (thank God) a blueprint that beckons us to love and worship these divine qualities. We long to be ‘higher than the angels’. It’s who we are supposed to be.

Both the Fitra and the animal aspects are God-given aspects of who we are, and we need both. But what we also need to understand is how to be with both in the right way. Challenges and experiences encourage the exercise of rationality and reflection so that we teach ourselves to make better choices. As the Qur’an says, “In the life we begin to understand that we need to be more circumspect in the way we exercise power. But becoming wiser is not a given. Not being a beast or a bully is something we also have to learn. One of the key barriers to this learning is our own selves. We can be in denial of this animal aspect within us. We would like to deny it because it’s uncomfortable to think of ourselves as being so low. We would like to pretend it’s not there, because it can be difficult and dangerous. Denial of the value and longing for power is serious because it means that we don’t acknowledge the reality of a situation and can even hide from our own motivations. We feel ourselves by seeing things like ‘they deserved it’ or ‘if I didn’t, somebody else would have’. Denial is also one of the reasons why bullying is often unrecognized by the perpetrators, victims and bystanders (those who witness bullying). It is common to hear bullying being trivialized: ‘It’s just a laugh’ or ‘people can just switch off if they don’t like it’. And this is serious because it means that those who are being victimised by bullies feel that they are somehow to blame for not being able to stand up to the abuse. Research shows that victims and bystanders typically do not seek help from peers or adults when they are being bullied. It means that we don’t acknowledge the problem on their own and that victims are likely to blame themselves for their victimisation and to ‘suffer in silence’. And it is obvious how not seeking help and blaming oneself can lead people to feeling like they are helpless and alone. And sometimes those feelings become overwhelming and people start to believe they will never succeed in life. And this is the dangerous part – sometimes people become so despairing that they lose hope entirely.

Changing this culture of denial is not easy. Most of us would perhaps like to deny our lust for power and dominance, and think of ourselves as good people. But we can begin by recognising that power and control are valuable to us, and that they help us to be and feel less vulnerable. Power and control is seductive and attractive. We all need to win sometimes. What is problematic though is if we need to win all the time, or if we want to win in ways that damage others.

One of the key aspects through, about the ‘Fitra’, and human development, is learning to exercise power with justice, love and compassion. I believe that part of this is being able to see through our blind spots and denials, and reflect on our own vulnerability and accept the mistakes that we make. In other words, we also need to come to terms with the fact that with winning also comes losing. Reflecting on our vulnerability is hard because it means admitting to ourselves - and sometimes to others - that we are weak, and that can make us even more vulnerable. And feeling vulnerable can make you want to defend yourself, perhaps when you’ve never even been attacked. It’s often said that bullies are insecure, attacking others in the hope that people will think they are stronger than they are, and that they help us to be and feel less vulnerable. Power and control is seductive and attractive. We all need to win sometimes. What is problematic though is if we need to win all the time, or if we want to win in ways that damage others.

Counselling can be a great support for children and adults. For contacts try:

• Islamic counselling www.islamiccounselling.info
• The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy www.bacp.co.uk
• Childline at www.childline.org.uk/Explore/Bullying
• NSPCC at www.nspcc.org.uk or www.gov.uk/bullying-at-school
• ACAS www.acas.org.uk/index

The tragic news of Hannah Smith, the 14-year-old British schoolgirl who committed suicide in August this year after suffering abuse from cyberbullies, once again focused the nation’s attention on bullying. Many worrying statistics came to light, especially about
Loneliness and isolation can affect our mental and physical wellbeing. Batool Haydar suggests three ways to face and overcome this growing social problem.
The world is bursting at its seams. Seven billion of us inhabit it already with thousands more being born every day. And yet - ironically - the greatest disease that threatens us is loneliness.

Surveys say that anomie - the feeling of not belonging - is on the rise and according to the UK’s Mental Health Foundation one in ten Britons admit to feeling lonely.

Loneliness is a multi-faceted problem. Everybody has a unique circumstance or reasons for what affects them the most, but on a basic level, we are all human and have the same needs. The feeling of isolation that overcomes us so many times is because we perceive ourselves as being unable to fit into society or find people we can relate to.

As teens we will do anything to fit into the crowd, as youth we move from one relationship to another in our quest not to be alone and as we grow older the stigma of being single hangs heavy over the heads of those of us who haven’t yet found a life partner. Everywhere we turn, we are encouraged to be more social, more outgoing or ‘part-of-the-crowd’.

When the real world fails us, the cyber world is simply waiting at the other end of a click. We can tweet, post, share, like, comment, follow and ‘friend’ until we have carved out a social cyber-haven that we feel we belong to. Our online friends become the people we turn to for company even if we have never met them. With so many options, our closest bonds are many elderly are being placed and left alone again, but emotionally battered. Whether you want to collect stamps or learn woodwork the sense of involvement and the satisfaction that result from having a hobby help give you a sense of worth and fulfillment.

Regardless of the hobby you choose, there will be new things to learn about yourself in the process and new avenues through which to explore the wonders of God. Through your experiences you will inevitably come across other like-minded hobbyists and begin to make connections with people who enjoy the same things that you do.

Hobby groups are some of the strongest communities and something that starts off as an interest can become an uplifting, lifetime investment. Starting off with the knowledge and intention that you are doing something that is recommended by your faith also helps to develop you spiritually and fun activities can become acts of ibadah (worship).

ENCOURAGE YOUR MIND
Get a hobby

Learning a craft has been encouraged by the Prophet Muhammad® and the Imams® after him because being able to work and create with your hands is a fulfilling ability. Ali bin Abi Talib in Nahjul Balagha says that “The value of a person depends upon the art and skill that he has attained” and elsewhere also mentions that “God Loves the honest craftsmen.”

One of the causes of loneliness is a breakdown of relationships between family members. Our closest bonds are those we have with our blood relations, so when these become distant or non-existent, it has a huge impact on us. The Qur’an states: “Indeed God enjoys justice and kindness and generosity towards relatives…” (16:90) and in his lifetime The Prophet Muhammad® repeatedly stressed this, in words and in practice.

One of the overwhelming emotions that attack a person when loneliness sets in is unrest. There is a feeling that one must be somewhere else, doing something else. This restlessness then leads to frustration and a seeking of release in different, sometimes dangerous ways including substance abuse, depression and suicide.

That is why we are told “Verily in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest” (Qur’an 13:28). This verse is commonly mentioned, enough that most Muslims know of it, but because we recite dhikr as a part of our daily prayers and supplications, we sometimes become complacent about its true value and effect on us. A fact stated by God however, cannot be anything but true, so the next time loneliness sets in, try reciting any dhikr you know - the simpler, the better.

To begin with it may feel like you’re chanting a mantra (which is exactly what you would be doing), but you will feel a sense of calm almost straight away and once that happens you can then consciously shift your attention to the words you are reciting, the One we are remembering and the fact that in reality, you are not alone, but always in the presence of Love.

If we can begin to appreciate our own value as part of the perfect design of an All-Wise Creator, we will begin to see the beauty in both being alone and part of a society. We must always remember there is a universe within ourselves and that in our journey of exploration within - and without - we are never without the company, support, strength and love of God.
On 13 October 1905 the struggle of the Suffragettes started with a request for the right to vote. Six years later the movement gave its first martyr for the cause of women's rights. Yvonne Ridley recalls the story of Emily Wilding Davison.
from somewhere in the Arab world or maybe one of the very many anti-capitalist protestors in recession-hit Europe or a member of the Occupy movement on America’s Wall Street.

The fact is the stones were thrown by a former private school governor who had gained a reputation as a militant and violent campaigner, for women’s rights … in Victorian Britain.

Emily Wilding Davison, although born in London, had roots in my native North East where her heroic deeds are often recalled today as a source of great pride and admiration.

She was appalled at the low regard for women in a Victorian society where they were denied real opportunities in the workplace and, more importantly, the right to vote was also denied. While the male servants of a large house could go out and vote on election day the female housemaids who employed him came.

And while Queen Victoria shamefully believed that women should not involve themselves in politics the Suffragettes thought otherwise and refused to be treated as second class citizens.

The denial of the right to vote outraged Emily who had already experienced the inequalities women faced because female scholars in that period were not awarded degrees at Oxford.

In 1910 she joined the Women’s Social and Political Union led by Emmeline Pankhurst.

Davison went on to become one of the leading lights in the movement because of her daring and determination to highlight the injustices faced by women.

Acting on the suffragette slogan ‘Deeds not Words’, Davison’s protest against the refusal of Britain’s rulers to grant votes for women turned her into a martyr for democracy and women’s rights.

Despite newspapers writing off her actions as those of a suicidal, mad woman Emily’s intentions were far more noble in that she was trying to raise awareness about women’s rights and equality by pinning the colours of the suffragette movement onto the King’s horse.

Isn’t it ironic that while the male-dominated media, government and establishment of the day tried to silence the demands for women’s rights way back then, a century later some officials from the male-dominated racing world tried to do the very same?

It’s probably worth remembering that while Emily was still unconscious in hospital Queen Alexandra, the then Queen Mother, asked one of her flunkies to send a telegram to the jockey who was recuperating at home. The note read: ‘Queen Alexandra was very sorry indeed to hear of your sad accident caused through the abominable conduct of a brutish human woman.’

Supporters of the Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign, the group set up to commemorate the centenary anniversary, ignored the blightings of the Establishment and organised a series of stunning events to remember this iconic woman.

In the end the powers that be did agree to have a ceremony at the racecourse in which the great, great, great niece of Emily unveiled a plaque to mark her sacrifice.

Earlier this year various memorial services and events were held around the UK to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of Emily and while many of us felt the occasion deserved to be marked with a minute’s silence at the iconic Epsom Derby, this small act of remembrance was rebuffed by the very same Establishment attitude that tried to crush the movement for women’s rights 100 years ago.

Emily was fatally injured when she deliberately ran onto the track during the 1913 Derby. She was appalled at the low regard for women in a Victorian society where they were denied real opportunities in the workplace and, more importantly, the right to vote was also denied. While the male servants of a large house could go out and vote on election day the female housemaids who employed him came.

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Sabah Arbilli

"Art is a tool to use to create dialogue in the community inspiring women and children. It is a platform for all to share and it enables cohesion and sharing of all cultural arts in a western world."

Born in Hebron, Palestine in 1979, Harouni is a very thought provoking artist whose work reflects the social, political and economic status of his people. I was struck by his piece entitled Qalandia 2067, which essentially is a three dimensional mould of an urban compound. It is named, in part, after one of the main checkpoints crossing through the West Bank and from a date.

Ceramics

Shahida Ahmed

"Art is a tool to use to create dialogue in the community inspiring women and children. It is a platform for all to share and it enables cohesion and sharing of all cultural arts in a western world."

Shahida Ahmed is a Ceramic Artist of Pakistani heritage based in Nelson, Lancashire. She has travelled internationally to exhibit her work and is currently presenting new work in Qatar. Although a student of Jim Robinson and David Roberts, Ahmed is essentially self-taught and has developed her craft to reflect her personal experiences in relation to heritage, religion and cultural identity. Although Ahmed works with clay, her work’s main references are Arabic calligraphy and geometry. She says that her work is the culmination of reflection and dhikr (invocation of ability and knowing which is not just taught but mastered with years of practice and considered practice).

Sabah Arbilli

"I envisage the lands with the sounds which echo in my ear taking me back to a place where I see harmony and tranquillity. I smell the place and sense my presence and belonging which I capture to share with the audience."

Born in Iraq, in 1979, Sabah is an Iraqi-British artist based in Pendle, Lancashire. He chose the professional name of Sabah Arbilli as a tribute to his place of birth and first teacher, the calligrapher master, Bijart Arbilli.

Although Sabah is a master calligrapher, he approaches his craft in a painterly fashion using materials more akin to a painter than a scribe. Sabah believes that his understanding of the principles of calligraphy deepened when he began to study engineering, allowing his work to be more accurate and precise. Sabah believes that his understanding of the principles of calligraphy deepened when he began to study engineering, allowing his work to be more accurate and precise.

Painting

Sabah Arbilli

Mats Abdel Karim Cederberg

Work of such beauty can only emerge from sincere and passionate study and practice.

Mats Cederberg is a Swedish artist working in the UK. His work is based around the ancient craft of Arabic calligraphy, which he uses as motif and emblem to create decorative art pieces for the home and other interiors. I met him at Islamia School in London where he was running a workshop for primary schoolchildren. The workshop was on Islamic geometry, one of Cederberg’s many talents in his artistic repertoire; he also designs ceramic tiles and plates, calligraphic murals in cloth, canvas or wood as well as mosaics using materials such as marble and gilded glass.

With Arabic calligraphy as his starting point, Cederberg has developed his talents in many traditional Islamic arts. He is currently studying for a Masters degree with visual, Islamic and traditional arts in The Princes School in central London to develop his skills even further.

Cederberg’s art conveys something of his sincere and noble disposition. It is also wonderful to see how his input brings out creativity in the children he works with. A selection of his work is available to view on Facebook.

Ceramics

Shahida Ahmed

"Art is a tool to use to create dialogue in the community inspiring women and children. It is a platform for all to share and it enables cohesion and sharing of all cultural arts in a western world."

Shahida Ahmed is a Ceramic Artist of Pakistani heritage based in Nelson, Lancashire. She has travelled internationally to exhibit her work and is currently presenting new work in Qatar. Although a student of Jim Robinson and David Roberts, Ahmed is essentially self-taught and has developed her craft to reflect her personal experiences in relation to heritage, religion and cultural identity. Although Ahmed works with clay, her work’s main references are Arabic calligraphy and geometry. She says that her work is the culmination of reflection and dhikr (invocational remembrance of God).

Ahmed’s father and uncles were all immigrants who came to the UK to work as weavers in the cotton mills. His father remained connected to the textile industry and formed his own fashion business years later. Ahmed believes these exposures have had a strong influence on her creative practice and feelings that the textures and surface colours in her work are informed by the early experiences of her father bringing home cotton remnants and her mother sewing in the family home.

Her work has an antiquated quality which leans towards the primitive. Using oxides to stain the clay and raku firings to create spontaneous surface decorations, Ahmed creates pieces which convey contemporary themes whilst being clearly rooted in Islamic tradition.

Speaking of her work, Ahmed says “My work is recognised for being traditional by this I mean the influence of heritage plays a huge role in my work. I use Islamic calligraphy, patterns, buildings and lots of textures and colour. The main body of my work is in clay and when you see my clay works they look like old authentic pieces from many hundreds of years ago. The colours are earthy and blues inspired by the blue mosque in Istanbul. The clay forms are amalgamated textures which fuse in a very high order to show traditional art.”

Ahmed has pieces on display in the private collections of Prince Charles, David Cameron and Jermaine Jackson as well as in a number of galleries in the Middle East.

Architecture

Wafa Harouni

Born in Hebron, Palestine in 1979, Harouni is a very thought provoking artist whose work reflects the social, political and economic status of his people. I was struck by his piece entitled Qalandia 2067, which essentially is a three dimensional mould of an urban compound. It is named, in part, after one of the main checkpoints crossing through the West Bank and from a date.
in the future, one hundred years after the beginning of the Israeli occupation. At first, it appears to represent a sedate architectural presentation of what could easily be a housing tenement located in any ghetto. But, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that it is in fact an environment engineered to curtail and subdue a once burgeoning civilisation, a political settlement. One of a series of five scale models, the others incorporating an airport and checkpoint crossing, Qalandia 2067 is filled with pessimism. The sites, which reflect progressive regression alongside a futurist narrative, leave one with the feeling that the outlook is grim. As a work of art, it is both unassuming and arresting, one cannot help but feel a sense of repulsion at its gruesome lack of architectural finesse. The antinome which clutter the rooftops, represent an almost preoccupation with secondary themes; wanted abstraction. Amidst the dilapidation, each light in the windows reflects a life, contained for political gain, highlighting the vast chasm between the perpetrator and its prey. It speaks of a struggle brought to fruition in response to an enigma of motive. It is this narrative which inspired an absurd representation of a man-made monstrosity, designed untoldly to uphold man-made occupation. Khaled Jarrar is currently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale.

Concrete Installation by
Khaled Jarrar

“I don’t do political art; I’m simply reflecting my own experiences”

Heritage
Islamic lamp with inscription

Addendum
Message/Messenger
by Abdulnasser Gharem

Heritage
Islamic lamp with inscription

The place to be
The Venice Biennale
Through November 24

The Venice Biennale is the world’s oldest and most prestigious art festival. Every two years, Italy invites artists from around the world to take part in the event which celebrates contemporary art and serves as a reminder of daily struggle to which they will go in order to escape oppression. It is a testimony to those who have been persecuted, tolerance and protest and highlights the oft-forgotten West Bank. As a work of art, it is both unnerving and serves as a reminder of daily struggle to which they will go in order to escape oppression. It is a testimony to those who have been persecuted, tolerance and protest and highlights the oft-forgotten West Bank. Every visitor has to choose to either walk the length of the wall or climb, and bears testimony to a human tragedy of its victims. This constructed replica of displaced people through the plight of its constructors through the plight of its victims. This constructed replica enables the plight of a region to be experienced by an international audience and spark debate where communication is freer and speaking out less perilous.

With this work, Jarrar invites the audience, through the oddity of projected experience, to negotiate the constructed perimeters of what it means to be Palestinian and to live under the occupation. It is a reminder of the atrocities of yesterday and serves as a reminder of the atrocities of yesterday. With Whole in the Wall, Jarrar reflects a weakness in an apparent stronghold, which, in turn, alludes to a blot on the landscape or fly in the ointment of opposing ideals. If nothing else, it keeps the trials of a nation in the public consciousness.

“In order for there to be reconciliation there has to be recognition that a wrong has occurred.” - Khaled Jarrar

Khaled Jarrar

Concrete Installation by Khaled Jarrar

“I don’t do political art; I’m simply reflecting my own experiences”

Abdulnasser Gharem was born in 1973 in the Saudi Arabian city of Taif. He is a celebrated artist as well as a lieutenant-colonel in the Saudi army. With no formal training, Gharem has managed to carve a niche for himself in the international art market whilst producing insightful and dynamic art work which successfully pushes the boundaries whilst managing to satisfy the Saudi censors. Gharem recently made history when an auction of his work in Dubai grossed over $800,000, establishing him as the highest selling artist in the Arab world. Gharem donated the proceeds to charity to foster art education in his homeland.

His record breaking installation ‘Message/Messenger’ is a pastiche of postmodern surrealism which in his own words reflects “peace, but with security.” Gharem re-created a scaled down gilded dome of a mosque and used the painted crescent moon from the top of the structure to prop up one side. Beneath that he placed a dove (the traditional symbol of peace). The construction is used as a metaphor; a primitive trap, precarious and dangerous, that would fall on the bird if it was disturbed.

Abdulnasser currently lives and works in Riyadh. He is also currently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale.

Abdulnasser Gharem is currently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale.

Abdulnasser Gharem Art of Survival was published in London October 2001 and is available online.

Abdulnasser, currently lives and works in Saudi Arabia. He is also currently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale.

Message/Messenger
by Abdulnasser Gharem

Aubin
Islamic lamp with inscription

C. 7th-8th century CE

Byzantine form lamp with Arabic inscriptions. Made from earthenware clay, these lamps bear no complex decoration or glaze. The slipper shaped design is a common lamp form which has been used for centuries and across many cultures. The early Islamic lamps are a continua- tion of Byzantine lamps. Decorations were initially stylised in the form of birds, grains, trees, plants or flowers. Then they became entirely geometric or linear with raised dots and Arabic script.

The wall itself has an orifice which symbolically resembles the shape of the map of historic Palestine, a region which has continually been threatened by external powers for centuries. This opening speaks volumes. It symbolises the humility of those individual’s who exist on a day to day basis under occupation, reveals the lengths to which they will go in order to escape the police state and reflects the tyranny of its constructors through the plight of its victims. This constructed replica bears testimony to a human tragedy and serves as a reminder of daily struggles which barely reach the headlines. It is a memoir of those confronted by an eight metre high barrier in what is a modern-day apartheid.

In order to enter the gallery space each visitor has to choose to either walk the length of the wall or climb, uncomfortably, through the hole. Jarrar believes this is a metaphor which has political currency whilst also serving as a reminder of the atrocities of yesterday.

With Whole in the Wall, Jarrar reflects a weakness in an apparent stronghold, which, in turn, alludes to a blot on the landscape or fly in the ointment of opposing ideals. If nothing else, it keeps the trials of a nation in the public consciousness.

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Message/Messenger
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Islamic lamp with inscription

C. 7th-8th century CE

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Message/Messenger
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Soon another ship followed “Santa Maria” (Christopher Columbus’s ship) in its path to the New World: ‘S Maria de Bogota’. It had purchased its 300 slaves from São Tomé in West Africa and disembarked the remaining 251 men, women and children in Santo Domingo in Hispaniola (an island in the Caribbean, now divided between Haiti and Dominican Republic).

In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas; in the same year the last of the remaining Muslim rulers were defeated and expelled from Andalucía in Spain. Is it really a coincidence? This has been the subject of several debates and books. Yet the fact that the Reconquista (expelling Muslims from Spain) and Conquest of Paradise (after Ridley Scott’s film of 1992) both happened in the same year still fascinates many writers. For Anouar Majid, Reconquista is the historical moment in which modern Europe was born, and therefore the image of the Moor (Muslims of Spain) had and still has a significant impact on the modern European psyche. As Christianity travelled across the Atlantic, its imagined opponent, the Moor travelled there too.

Majid claims that in the last 500 years, since the defeat of Muslims in Iberia and the conquest of the New World, the West has never been worried about its cultural and racial hegemony until recently. The growing number of Muslim immigrants in Europe and the ever increasing population of Hispanic and Mexican immigrants in the United States have been the source of a great anxiety for the last several years. This anxiety, based on the feeling that the West is going to lose its control and dominance over those minorities may be a recent phenomenon, but the image of the West’s “other”, says the author, has always been the Moor.

He argues in particular that the West and Islam have never been parted as...
some may assume. In fact they have been travelling companions since at least 1492 despite the efforts of zealous advocates of Christian priority or national homogeneity. He also argues that without Islam there would be no European identity and no America. When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sponsored Christopher Columbus’s mission to the ‘East’ via the western Atlantic route, their ultimate goal was nothing less than the recapitulation of Jerusalem. It is argued that before confronting Islam there was no such thing as a European identity as documented by the acclaimed historian David Levering Lewis who shows that the terms ‘‘Euro’’nes’’ and ‘‘Europe’’ were first coined by Iulio (Pausanias, an eighth-century Andalusian priest, to describe the new identity of Christians who defeated Muslim armies near Potted in T32).

Majid wants to show that the specter of this early confrontation has never left the consciousness of the West, neither the figure of the Moor, as the prime opponent of Arab Islam and the Moorish tradition. Indeed Jews and Arabs were indiscernible (both known as Semites) in the European imagination well into contemporary history. He then shows that anti-Semitism, which condemned Jews to exclusion because of their racial unfitness, has now given way to Islamophobia, a new political platform that would channel the European Right wing’s hatred of Jews into a more permissible condemnation of Islam.

The book then continues to explain the two heirs to the Moorish legacy, Hispanic Americans and European Muslims. It is interesting that both are recognised by Samuel Huntington; first Muslims were portrayed as the natural enemy of the West in his book Clash of Civilisations, and the latter, the Hispanic wave (mostly Mexican immigrants) as the immediate threat to American integrity in his next book. Who We Are? Huntington believes that the so-called cement in the structure of the ‘American Creed’ is the product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of America. This was formed by the ‘key elements’ of the English language, Christianity, religious commitment, English concept of the rule of law and also ‘dissecting Protestant values of individualism’. To Huntington, Majid claims, ‘America is not the so-called nation of immigrants but a “society of settlers” mostly from the British Isles’.

In this context Hispanics who are far from being ‘Anglo-Saxon Protestants’, have become the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by 2040. This is white new immigrants (in contrast to the earlier waves of arrivals to America that posts like Ellis Island are more likely to resist assimilation and will not identify fully with mainstream American culture. Huntington knows well that there is no national project without its scapegoats. He also accepts that ‘it is the attacks on America, whether real or imagined, that unites people and keeps the deconstruction and multiculturalism at bay for a while’. Majid argues that soon after Muslims were contained (mostly through the ‘war on terror’) politicians turned their attention to Latin immigrants as the ‘scapegoat’. He then talks about similarities between the condition of Muslims in Europe and Hispanics in the United States, showing how both are trapped in a racially motivated exclusion.

The book is well documented and brilliantly researched, with lot of detail, not only very useful for students as well as scholars of history and humanities, but also very readable, and even necessary for the general public, especially now.

Anouar Majid is professor of English and director of the Centre for Global Humanities at the University of New England in Maine.
Stepping Back from the Brink of War?

Shuttle diplomacy has created a possibility to avert a military strike against Syria but the axe of a new war spearheaded by Washington still hangs over the Middle East, writes Reza Murshid.
The world has not seen such frantic last-minute diplomatic manoeuvrings in years between the former Cold War foes, Washington and Moscow. An agreement reached between the two long-standing rivals has for now at least, averted a military strike against Damascus.

According to the deal, if Syria hands over the details of its chemical weapons stockpiles, then it has until November to allow United Nations inspectors access to the chemical weapons sites. The agreement also stipulates that the destruction of the chemical weapons sites would have to be completed by mid 2014.

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Washington appears too eager to punish Assad to even present its proofs. Obama has said that he is ‘highly confident’ that Assad’s forces used the chemical weapon. But being ‘highly confident’ is not enough to stage a devastating war against a country. As a lawyer he should understand the difference between what is ‘highly confident’ and what is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’.

Putin contended that the chemical weapons could have been unleashed by the rebels with the intention to provoke a military strike by Western powers to reverse recent gains made by the Syrian military. Putin consistently demanded proof from the American side. Putin even stated that if no proof is shown, then no proof actually exists. He went so far as calling Kerry a liar for his allegations that Syrian government forces were involved in the chemical attack.

Obama Upstaged by Putin

While Obama was under fire at home for ‘not acting like a commander-in-chief’, Putin stole the show on the world stage by pursuing a much more active diplomacy. Putin even took the war to Obama’s own turf by printing a well-written op-ed in the New York Times, in which he talked directly to the American people. Donald Trump admitted that it was well done without appearing malicious.

While remaining cordial throughout his piece, Putin took issues with Obama’s appeal to ‘American exceptionalism’, saying that all countries regardless of their size were equal because ‘God created us equal’. Putin was appealing to the majority of Americans who harboured misgivings about Obama’s path to war. He was also appealing to a world that is tired of American interference and its disastrous consequences over the past decades.

Putin reminded Americans that any attack on Syria would be in violation of international law if it did not have the blessing of the United Nations, thereby indirectly calling the United States a ‘potential outlaw’.

The Russian president went on to warn the Americans how the extremist elements among the rebels fighting in Syria may threaten the security of Western nations and Russia, reminding them how the ‘freedom fighters’ in Libya recently moved to Mali to cause problems there. There have been long-standing tensions between Chechen separatists and Moscow, some of whom are now fighting along with other rebel groups to topple Assad. Syria has always been home to a sizeable Chechen population.

Russia, the Undoing of the Obama Effect

Every presidency has its highs and lows. Obama’s high moments were in his first term when he was the darling of the Western press and the liberal establishment in the United States. If Obama had decided not to run for a second term, he would have been remembered much more fondly by posterity.

The second term, however, has been plagued with a number of serious mistakes on part, most notably:

• Giving a high priority to drone attacks which has destroyed the image of Obama as a man of peace and a Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

• Condoning US government espionage on not only American citizens but also on America’s own European allies such as Germany.

• His persecution of the whistle-blower Edward Snowden and the tussle with Russia over his extradition.

• Adopting incoherent positions vis-à-vis the aftermath of the Arab Spring (the military coup against Morsi in Egypt, which Putin wished to condemn) and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

A Sense of Déjà Vu

But aside from the above damaging examples, most observers believe that the case of Syria has had the most deleterious effect on Obama’s standing both at home and abroad. At home he is seen as vacillating and indecisive; a Republican commentator called him ‘Commander-in Confusion, instead of Commander-in-Chief’. He is also seen as inept at home. Many Americans have asked why Obama tolerated the deaths of over 110,000 and displacement of millions in Syria and was only moved to action by the deaths of over 1,000.

When Obama kept referring to the 100-year old convention against the use of chemical weapons, Americans with a better memory remembered how the United States remained silent two and half decades ago when Saddam Hussein unleashed his chemical weapons on Iraqi soldiers as well as the defence-less Kurds of Halabja.

Abroad, Obama is seen as every bit as hawkish as his predecessor George W. Bush because he keeps ranting about the threat of force as a panacea in his dealings with smaller independent countries.

His favourite phrase regarding Syria and Iran has been ‘all options are on the table’. John Kerry mimicked his boss during his press conference in Israel when he said to ‘accomplish that [disarmament of the Syrian chemical weapon] the threat of force remains.’ If only Obama had provided the proof that he says his intelligence team has given him, instead of making the threats. No smoking gun has yet been presented to the world. The mainstream press in Washington even has doubts that Assad himself ordered the attack. A decade after the United States failed to find the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) after invading Iraq, the United States is making a similar blunder with Syria. This time it will not attack Syria because it has such weapons - it will be attacking because it believes Damascus has used them. In the race to attack Iraq, then CIA Director George Tenet insisted in 2002 that US intelligence showing Iraq had weapons of mass destruction was beyond doubt.

Obama has said that he is ‘highly confident’ that Assad’s forces used chemical weapons. But being ‘highly confident’ is not enough to stage a military strike against a country. As a lawyer he should understand the difference between what is ‘highly confident’ and what is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’.

According to an Associated Press report, certain unnamed intelligence operatives in the US had serious doubts that chemical attacks were carried out on Assad’s orders. Some officials even expressed that the rebels could have carried out the attack in a callous and calculated attempt to draw the West into the war. The AP report goes on to add that this suspicion was not included in the official intelligence report. How convenient!

Optimists believe that the agreement reached between Russia and the United States will not only end the possible US strike on Syria but will also help the creation of a negotiated settlement to end the war in Syria.

But those who have been watching the Middle East and North Africa over the past five decades can still hear the drums of war despite this agreement. The pessimists also look at the history of other nations such as Libya under Mu’ammar Qaddafi, and draw parallels. They say even if Syria is not attacked now, it will be attacked after it turns over its chemical arsenal because it will be considered an easier target. Syria and Libya are two different societies, and one scenario cannot be replicated automatically in another. But let us not forget that it was only a decade after Qaddafi decommissioned his chemical arsenal that he was overthrown.
Can you imagine a political party waiting for almost a century for an opportunity to rule the country, finally having a chance at it only to blow it within a year through the incompetence of its leaders.

This is what has happened to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a party founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, a school teacher who advocated the thesis that Islam must influence not only the affairs of the individual believer but also every aspect of socio-political life.

Following the toppling of Hosni Mubarak from power in 2011, Egyptians went to the polls to elect their new president in the first free elections in the country’s history. The front runners in the race were Mohammad Morsi, a member of Muslim Brotherhood, and an army general viewed by many as too close to the ancien regime. Morsi triumphed over his main rival but his victory was not a landslide, ostensibly making it more difficult for him and his party to push ahead with the party’s agenda to Islamise Egypt.

The four-year rule envisioned for Morsi came to a screeching halt on the anniversary of his accession to power. On July 3 this year, the head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, declared that Morsi had been removed from office, and that the constitution and new presidential and Shura Council elections would be suspended.

In place of Morsi, the military installed Adly Mansour as ‘the acting President of Egypt’. Mr Mansour is a judge who headed the Supreme Constitutional Court prior to taking Morsi’s seat.

Following Morsi’s ouster the Egyptian army has been going after the Brotherhood leaders and activists with a vengeance. In August, the Egyptian Military attempted to remove camps of Muslim Brotherhood supporters from sit-ins being held throughout the country. In the rapidly escalating violence that ensued, close to a thousand pro-Morsi supporters were killed. The extent of the violence unleashed by the coup regime was such that some of key Egyptian politicians, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Muhammad al-Baradei, who had joined the caretaker government, resigned in protest. (The coup regime has recently extended the state of emergency, and staged massive crackdowns on activists beyond the Muslim Brotherhood. Many activists who took to the streets demanding Morsi’s resignation are feeling apprehensive now about a military that is extending its powers every day.)

The Muslim Brotherhood is with no stranger to imprisonment and torture, and even martyrdom. Hassan al-Banna was assassinated and the Brotherhood’s key ideologue Sayid Qutb was hanged under Gamal Abd al-Nasir’s regime. But the Brotherhood has never had so many of its members killed in such a short time.

If It Quacks Like A Coup…

The Muslim Brotherhood is the quintessential Islamic movement of the twentieth century. Many Muslim radicals of the 20th and the 21st centuries looked up to the Muslim Brotherhood in their efforts to address the problems of their societies. (Sayid Qutb’s exegesis...
of the Holy Qur'an, Fī Dīlah al-Qur'ān has been a must read for any young Muslim radical from the 1960’s to the present day.)

So it was no surprise that following Morsi’s ouster, demonstrations were held across the Muslim world to protest the coup and express support for the Brotherhood. There appears to be visible support for the Brotherhood at the grassroots level in different Muslim countries, but the coup in Egypt has divided governments in the Islamic world.

While Turkey and Qatar have backed Morsi, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies have supported the coup-installed government in Cairo. Turkey’s Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who has been involved in Islamising projects of his own, is especially apprehensive about the coup in Egypt because he fears that the Remalists in the Turkish army might get inspiration from across the Mediterranean and end his own Justice and Development’s hold on power.

Both the United States and the UK have been in a quandary regarding the coup. They seem to be happy that Morsi is gone but don’t want to appear to be backing the Egyptian military. The United States has stopped short of calling the turn of events a coup because this would necessitate the withdrawal of the multi-billion dollar assistance it has given Cairo as a reward for making peace with Israel in 1979. Right after the coup the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf monarchies have supported the coup-installed government in Cairo. Morsi, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies have supported the coup-instaed government in Cairo.

Lessons to Be Learned

The unfortunate lesson that Islamists have learned from the turn of events in Egypt is that engaging in the democratic process is an exercise in futility, and nothing is to be gained by playing the democracy game. It is clear to them that the forces of secularism and disbelief are bent on denying Muslims even a limited chance to run their country. Perhaps they are right when you add the bitter experience of Egypt to recent experiences of Islamists in Palestine and Algeria. In Palestine the democratically elected Hamas has faced constant opposition from Israel and the United States. Hamas is not seen as the legitimate representative of people in Gaza despite the fact that it won elections in a fair and free democratic process. In Algeria, a coup in the 1990’s nipped Islamism in the bud before the Islamist election victors even had a chance to rule the country.

While the use of force against a legitimately elected government needs to be condemned, there are also lessons to be learned from Morsi’s own misadventure. No Muslim is happy seeing the forces of secularism attempting to stifle the Islamic renaissance, one needs to identify how the agents of the Islamic awakening shot themselves in the foot.

Lessons to be learned from Morsi's ouster, demonstrations were held across the Muslim world to protest the coup and express support for the Brotherhood. There appears to be visible support for the Brotherhood at the grassroots level in different Muslim countries, but the coup in Egypt has divided governments in the Islamic world.

While Turkey and Qatar have backed Morsi, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies have supported the coup-installed government in Cairo. Turkey’s Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who has been involved in Islamising projects of his own, is especially apprehensive about the coup in Egypt because he fears that the Remalists in the Turkish army might get inspiration from across the Mediterranean and end his own Justice and Development’s hold on power.

Both the United States and the UK have been in a quandary regarding the coup. They seem to be happy that Morsi is gone but don’t want to appear to be backing the Egyptian military. The United States has stopped short of calling the turn of events a coup because this would necessitate the withdrawal of the multi-billion dollar assistance it has given Cairo as a reward for making peace with Israel in 1979. Right after the coup the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf monarchies have supported the coup-installed government in Cairo.

Lessons to Be Learned

The unfortunate lesson that Islamists have learned from the turn of events in Egypt is that engaging in the democratic process is an exercise in futility, and nothing is to be gained by playing the democracy game. It is clear to them that the forces of secularism and disbelief are bent on denying Muslims even a limited chance to run their country. Perhaps they are right when you add the bitter experience of Egypt to recent experiences of Islamists in Palestine and Algeria. In Palestine the democratically elected Hamas has faced constant opposition from Israel and the United States. Hamas is not seen as the legitimate representative of people in Gaza despite the fact that it won elections in a fair and free democratic process. In Algeria, a coup in the 1990’s nipped Islamism in the bud before the Islamist election victors even had a chance to rule the country.

While the use of force against a legitimately elected government needs to be condemned, there are also lessons to be learned from Morsi’s own misadventure. No Muslim is happy seeing the forces of secularism attempting to stifle the Islamic renaissance, one needs to identify how the agents of the Islamic awakening shot themselves in the foot.

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Journeying to God

Alexander Khaleeli explores the symbolism of Hajj and discusses the mindset that we, as pilgrims to God’s House, should cultivate to make the most of this sacred journey.
Il n some time and place, a man does a clean, simple travelling robe. He gathers his provisions for the road together in a backspack and bids farewell to his family, knowing that he will not see them for many weeks, months, perhaps even years, or perhaps – if something should happen to him on the way – never again. The man picks up his prayer beads and walking staff and steps out of his home, perhaps joining a stream of others just like him or perhaps utterly alone. With this step, he has begun a journey that will take him across great distances. Maybe he is a medieval English Christian on his way to Canterbury, a Japanese Shintoist visiting the 88 temples of Shikoku, or a lover coming in quiet, tearful remembrance, to the grave of the beloved.

The act of pilgrimage, of travelling to a place of great spiritual significance, permeates human existence across cultures. It is a journey whose destination is nothing less than the transcendent itself, and whatever their exact significance we believe that these places we visit are where our mundane world meets a supernatural one. These places are frequently imbued with great historical importance as well and by visiting them we affirm our faith in the events, the people and, ultimately, the meaning with which they imbue our existence as human beings. Pilgrimage, then, is as much a spiritual journey as it is a physical one.

According to the Qur'an, the Ka'ba was the first house of worship to be raised for mankind (Qur'an 3:96) and so the first place of pilgrimage for them to visit. As a result, its history as a religious site, the rituals associated with it and its landmarks, are all deeply symbolic of mankind’s innate relationship with God as expressed in the various covenants He has made through his prophets. By traversing its landscape and performing its rites we are connected to the first prophet, Adam, to the forerunner of the modern monotheistic faiths, Abraham, and his son, Ishmael, and to the latter’s descendent, the final prophet, Muhammad. It is the original pilgrimage from which all others are derived. By bringing together people from the farthest reaches of the world, the Ka'ba serves not only to unite the members of the human race with one another, but also to present the present time with the past and the future, and the human with the divine.

The Hajj symbolises the pre-eternal covenant with God because its centre-piece – the Ka'ba – is, according to the teachings of the Prophet’s Household, the earthly representation of God's throne ( karsh) which is both the manifestation of His lordship (nabhiyyah) over His creation and the utmost limit of our existence. The throne is quite literally where our limited world meets the absolute; and our physical journey to the Ka'ba then becomes a symbolic reflection of our spiritual journey to God’s throne. This is when God instructs Abraham “purify My House!” (Qur'an 2:125). He claims ownership of the Ka'ba for Himself (by calling it 'My House'), for it marks the very threshold of His transcendence and is a symbol of His mastery and lordship over all Creation. It is to this that we make our pilgrimage.

But if Hajj is a journey to God, then we must realise that we cannot reach God except through devoting ourselves to Him; this means freeing ourselves from everything that connects us to this world and its pleasures, save that which accomplishes this is our sincere intention to attain nearness to Him. It is no accident that when we look at the rituals of the Hajj, we find a spiritual journey to God’s throne. This is where our mundane to the divine, and from the rational to the supra-rational, from the earthly to the pre-eternal - the monotheism which pervades the entire universe and lies at the very core of human existence.

Abraham as he threw stones at Satan when he appeared to him in this place and tried to cast doubt into his mind. Neither Abraham nor Ishmael knew the purpose for which God had asked him to offer up his son, only that it was their duty to submit to God: 'When he was old enough to assist in his endeavour, he said, 'My son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. See what you think.' He said, 'Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If Allah wishes, you will find me to be patient' (Qur'an 71:102).

It was after Abraham had demonstrated this complete and utter devotion to his Lord that God raised him up to the highest level! And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, He said, 'I am making you the leader of mankind' (Qur'an 2:123) and completed His covenant with him.

So when we set out on our journey to Makkah, we too must cultivate this pure devotion and sacrifice to God, mentally preparing ourselves to offer everything we have to him and to spend our lives in his service. It is not the physical journey to Makkah alone that accomplishes this, any more than it is the bodies of the sacrificial animals that God receives – ‘It is not their flesh or their blood that reaches Allah. Rather it is your God-consciousness that reaches Him’, (Qur’an 22:37) – rather what accomplishes this is our sincere intention to attain nearness to Him. Our physical journey to Makkah must be a manifestation of this inner state of devotion; then, and only then, will we have realised the pure monotheism of Abraham - the monotheism which pervades the entire universe and lies at the very core of human existence.
Middle East: Playground of Imperial Strategies

As the Middle East teeters on the brink of another foreign military intervention, Ali Jawad examines the regional power-balance and suggests making use of the impending Hajj pilgrimage to improve Muslim political reality.
over the past two years the Middle East has been a permanent media highlight. The peoples of the region have experienced perhaps the most dramatic changes in the course of a single year - the rapid rise and fall of al-Qaida in Iraq, the endless cycle of violence and turmoil in the region. As a result, the region is in a state of strategic turmoil - a chaos which, despite its seeming randomness, has an underlying logic and direction to it. Three of the region's traditional powerhouses have been impaired by playing any meaningful role in the region's politics as a result of their subservience and strife. One is naturally led to question whether this is a mere coincidence. And more importantly, who stands to benefit from this reality? When developments in Iraq, Syria and Egypt are viewed separately, one is able to cite both common and unique sets of challenges that affect each respective nation. While such an approach is no doubt necessary to consider the development of domestic events, it is equally necessary to observe the wider repercussions that take shape as a result of this fundamental re-aligning of the regional power balance.

The track record of western military interventions in the region is eminently clear about the repercussions of such adventures and whose they ultimately serve. For the US, the protracted quagmire in Iraq is an example of the costs of fostering a climate of strategic uncertainty and replace this with its own propped up image of and ultimately attacking resistance movements and nations.

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Western feminism, as an intellectual movement, aims at freeing women from the bonds of oppression. It also aims at bringing about an equitable existence for women in relation to men. There are not many enlightened people who would deny the existence of such inequality, and it is to be taken for granted that women, as one half of humanity, should enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men.

However, history has shown that women have suffered a lack of equality. It appears that (for reasons that seem to have nothing to do with women as human beings) somewhere along the line of human development humanity lost sight of women as one irreducible pillar of human existence. Before this shift in perception, women were appreciated for all of their abilities. History has also shown that the leadership qualities of women, for example, in figures such as the Prophet Muhammad’s wife Khadija, the Roman empress of ancient times, etc. These women were the trendsetters of their times and they were not alone.

Western feminism has fallen short of resolving these issues. Western Feminist approaches have produced few solutions to the persisting problem of gender inequality, says M. Haghiri. There is little coherence in the Western presentation of women’s issues, even by the feminists themselves. As a result Western feminism has fallen short of resolving these issues, despite many courageous attempts to unity. Western feminism has fallen short of resolving these issues, despite many courageous attempts to unity. At the same time, a true concern with feminist issues does not really have to subscribe to any particular ‘ism’ in order to voice itself.

The fixation with underlying sexual issues has produced within the Western feminist’s camp other worldviews, and crude attempts that have tried to explain the basis of women’s wellbeing as a purely physiological process: Naomi Wolf’s 2002 book emphasised the connection between women’s reproductive organs and their brains. This connection was seen by her as a process of signalling in both directions and involves corresponding hormonal activity. For Western feminism, the wellbeing of women is dependent on the smooth operation of this physiological process. However, like men, women are more than the sum of their specific physi- ology, even if we take into account their natural calling to bear children.

Western intellectual feminist perspec- tives have been unable to alleviate many of feminism’s essential complaints. But history of women’s suffrage, it is evident that today we have a world where Western-inspired feminism (and thereby the portrayal of women in a heavily intellec- tualised context) has at best brought about only the partial and superficial emancipation of women. For example, despite a sharp radicalisation of Western feminism in the 1960s and all the feminist movements before and since, we still have a world in which many women feel they are imprisoned by reason of their sex.

Western feminists have addressed such concerns in a number of ways. Rosemary Tong’s ‘Feminist Thought’ is an excellent introduction to the differ- ences in feminist views that run across Western feminist thinking. For example, whilst a Marxist feminist sees the capi- talist economic system as the ultimate cause of women’s oppression, a black feminist would consider racial inequalities as the main culprit - causing a double oppression. In the same way, all other Western feminists (Radical, Liberal, Existential, etc.) attribute their particular situation to different essential causes. Indeed, it is this fragmentation of thought and approach to feminist issues that characterises, at least in part, Western feminism in general.

Every single strand of feminism is focused on only one approach to femi- nist issues and therefore loses sight of what all the others are saying. In this way, Western society has implemented a fragmented feminist view of the world. It is as if Western thinking about women has succeeded in dividing a more encompassing vision. To this extent, there is little coherence in the Western presentation of women’s issues, even by these feminists themselves.

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THE GRAVE SIN OF WASTEFULNESS

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under the following facts in order to understand how much is wasted in today’s industrialised western societies. The statistics are taken from an article written last year by the Washington Post’s Brad Plumer, who specialises in environmental issues. “Each year 40% of all food in the United States goes uneaten. It is estimated that “Americans are squandering the equivalent of $165 billion each year by throwing away far too much food.” The article breaks down where and how this food is wasted. For instance, 7% of the produce grown in the US is left in the farm fields to rot. Then the farmers cut their yield by throwing out produce that is not up to cosmetic standards. More food is destroyed in the manufacturing process, then during retail it is estimated that $15 billion worth of fruit and vegetables are tossed out each year, not to mention what happens in restaurants and homes. Interestingly, Americans waste 50% more food than they did in the 1970’s. These figures highlight the correlation between wastefulness and the rise of consumerism. The average American uses 53 times more goods and services than the average Chinese citizen. North America and Europe account for 60% of private consumption while only constituting 12% of the global population. The average American citizen eats 222 pounds of meat each year. United States homes have more television sets than people. Each woman in the United Kingdom owns an average of 21 handbags.

Islam is fundamentally opposed to wastefulness. When individuals fall into the trap of being wasteful and committing excess society itself suffers. Consumer societies are particularly prone to wasteful behaviour, which can slowly eat away at the fabric of society. Islam aims to protect society and the individual from the negative effects of wastefulness and hyper-consumerism, both of which hurt the environment and his own soul. In the Holy Qur’an God shows his strong dislike of excess: “O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment on every occasion of prayer, and eat and drink, but do not waste; indeed He does not like the wasteful.” (7:31).

It is interesting to note that this is one of the verses where God addresses all of humanity, not only the believers. The refrain is repeated in another verse: “It is He who produces gardens trellised and without trellises, and palm-trees and crops of diverse produce, olives and pomegranates, similar and dissimilar. Eat of its fruits when it fructifies, and give its due on the day of harvest, and do not be wasteful; indeed He does not like the wasteful.” (6:141).

God also warns that the recompense of the wasteful and extravagant in the hereafter will be divine punishment: “The extravagant are the inmates of the fire.” (Qur’an 40:43)

“Whenever God takes it a step further and in a metaphorical expression describes the wasteful and extravagant as the brothers of the devils: “Indeed the wasteful are brothers of satans, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord” (17:27).

As mentioned at the end of the verse the devils (shayateen) are known for their ungratefulness to whatever God has favoured them with. A true believer is one who seeks moderation in his beliefs and actions. Wastefulness and extravagance are opposed to moderation. Imam Ali bin Abi Talib⁷ is reported to have said: “Whenever God intends goodness from his servants, he reveals to them to live moderately and spend his life in the best way and keeps him away from extravagance.”

The companions of the Prophet⁶ and Imams⁸ took these verses and traditions to heart. For instance, Uthman, the second caliph, ordered one of his servants to give 200 gold coins to Abu Dharr. When his servant approached Abu Dharr and tried to give him the coins Abu Dharr asked him whether he had given the same amount of coins to all Muslims. When he realised that it was just him, he refused and said that he did not need them. The servant responded: “But, I don’t see anything in your house that would show that you are not in need.” Abu Dharr retorted by pointing at a bowl and saying: “There are two pieces of barley bread in it and hence I am needless.”

Imam Ja’far bin Muhammad al-Sadiq⁹ raises some interesting questions and then shows how moderation should be practised. He is reported to have said: “Do you think that God provided someone with wealth it is because he is His beloved? And if He has given less to someone it is because he is low? No! It is not so. Whatever wealth there is, it all belongs to God. God gives it to whomever He wishes as a trust and He has permitted the trustee to eat, drink, wear clothes, marry, and ride from it, (but) in moderation. If he has excess he must distribute it among the poor and fulfill their needs. Then whoever follows the Divine commands, whatever he has eaten, drunk, worn, married and rode in moderation, all this is lawful for him. The thing that He does not act upon, every-thing is prohibited.”

Therefore, the Islamic position on wastefulness and extravagance is clear. Islam advises us to be moderate in our spending and usage of consumer goods. An individual who is wasteful and extravagant and has attached himself to the world will eventually be led away from the remembrance of God. This will put him on the slippery slope of committing more sins and the path of divine retribution in the hereafter.
Angelic help is a powerful and myste-
rious affair because it pertains to the
divine realm. Nothing exists that does
not owe its existence to the Creator,
mind you. Angels are spiritual, non-
corporeal beings but still they are
created creatures. They do impact
on the physical world wherever it is
God's will. Suitably, the etymology of
the Greek word 'angelos' reminds us
that an angel is a messenger to men.
Thus angels have been created to be
God's servants. It is fitting that guardian
angels have as their special service
to care after human beings. Indeed,
Holy Scripture says that angels even
protected Jesus in his infancy, served
him in the desert and strengthened him
through terrible sufferings in the garden
of Gethsemane. They will announce
Christ's second coming and be there to
serve him again.

One of the most entrancing narratives
in the Bible about a guardian angel is
in the Book of Tobit. The young man
Tobias journeys to Razes in Persia in
search of practical matters: money and
a wife. In disguise, the angel Raphael
accompanies him as a guide. As they
cause by the River Tigris, Raphael
saves the boy from being bitten by
a monstrous fish. He then instructs
him how to cut up the fish so as to
use its entrails as healing ingredients
and potions. Later Raphael helps in
arranging his marriage with a beautiful
and pious girl, Sara. Not so easy you
might think, because the maiden is also
coveted by Asmodeus, a jealous demon
that harms anyone who approaches her.
However, the angel reassures Tobias:
'Do not be afraid, for she was destined
for you from all eternity.' And so the
young man obeys Raphael. By burning
some of the fish's entrails he creates
smoke that puts the demon to flight. Lo
and behold, Sara is now free to marry
him! It is indeed a union willed by God.

Raphael eventually reveals his true
identity as a heavenly emissary. He
also makes clear that he is not a being
acting independently but as directed by
the Most High. All's well that ends well.

Undeniably, the story of Tobias and
the angel often seductively portrayed
in Christian art, such as Verrocchio's
delightful, colourful picture in London's
National Gallery) includes elements of
magic and crude materialism, reflecting
somewhat the culture and mentality of
the writer. In truth, the function of a
 guardian angel is a bit more than that
of a marriage counsellor and business
adviser! Only in the perfect and exem-
plary message of the New Testament
will the true nature and purpose of
angelic realities be clarified.

The Feast of the Guardian Angels falls
on October 2nd. It was initially only
celebrated locally, in various parts of
the world, but throughout history requests
for a wider place in the Church's Missal
kept growing until Pope Clement X
made it into a universal feast in 1670.

That is significant because it reflects
a popular devotion to that effect.
Just as there is an angel of light seeking
to assist you, there would be also a
tenebrous angel – perhaps like the
fiend Asmodeus of Tobias' story – trying
to assist you, there would be also a
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After a century, leech-therapy is back in the service of medicine. Laleh Lohrasbi examines the current use of this ancient animal.

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limy, squirmry and parasitic, the bloodsucking leech is probably the last thing you would think of as medicinal cure. But since 1985, when a Harvard surgeon, Joseph Upton, employed them to successfully help reattach the ear of a patient that had been bitten off by a dog, the long neglected creature has made a remarkable comeback in the world of medicine.

The use of leeches in medicine is perhaps as old as the Pyramids. Hieroglyphic paintings on the walls of ancient Egyptians from 3,500 years ago depict leeches. The first description of leech therapy, classified as bloodletting, was found in the Sanskrit surgical textbook Sushruta Samhita (800 BC) Sushruta, also considered the father of plastic surgery, listed about six types of leeches (poisonous and non-poisonous). Later on, Galen (200 AD) prescribed use of leeches in surgery, listed about six types of leeches (poisonous and non-poisonous). Later on, Galen (200 AD) prescribed use of leeches to treat swelling, grafting skin, restoring blood vessels and circulation. In the US, Hirudo Medicinalis, or medicinal leech, was first approved for medical use in 1984.

The commercial use of medicinal leeches for medicinal purposes stating that the leech met the definition of a ‘medical device’.

Two decades earlier, Joseph Upton had turned to them to replant the ear of his five-year-old patient. Ears, which have very small blood vessels, had never been successfully replanted. Upton had no trouble with the boy’s arteries, but as he struggled to reconnect the veins, clots began to form. Often during reattachment surgery, it is relatively simple to reconnect the larger arterial blood vessels but almost impossible to reconnect the thinner, more delicate venous vessels. This leads to pooling of blood and swelling, which may cut off the flow of fresh arterial blood to the reconnected limb completely.

In the army, Upton had used maggots to disintegrate wounds so the idea of using leeches wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for him. The leeches drained the local blood, decompressing the pressure within the reattached ear, ensuring blood flow to the reattached tissue until the venous blood vessels could reconnect and survive.

Nobody knows how many lives, limbs and appendages they have saved since then but one thing is certain - today the disregard to which the leech had slumped following the discovery of antibiotics in the 20th century has clearly been reversed.

When the leech is brought into contact with a patient, it attaches itself with its suckers, injects a natural anesthetic, and the three jaws of its head sucker slice into the patient’s skin with a sawing motion. They secrete their saliva into the bitten area which consists of more than 100 different compounds. The effects of these compounds on a live organ include normalisation and improvement of capillary circulation, anti-inflammatory, immune-stimulating, anaesthetic, anticoagulant and antibacterial effects.

Hirudin, the anticoagulant compound of the leech saliva, prevents blood from clotting. This allows the blood to continue to flow through damaged tissue until the veins re-grow and regain circulation. This procedure makes leeches an incredibly valuable tool in reattaching minute veins such as those found on ears, fingers, toes, scalp, skin and breast. The anticoagling agents also dissolve clots found in vessels, eliminating the risk of them travelling to other parts of the body blocking an artery or a vein.

Leech therapy is also practised effectively in knee osteoarthritis. This therapy reduces pain, stiffness, inflammation and joint dysfunction in inflammatory diseases. The leech’s bioactive substances help to relieve oedema and stiffness by reducing blood congestion, improving blood circulation, facilitating the reach of nutrients and biological substances to the affected site.

In the past leeches were collected from freshwaters and the wild leading to all sorts of infections being transmitted to the human body. Today leeches are mass produced in leech farms. Modern Hirudotherapy differs from its ancient predecessor in that leeches are grown at special bio-factories where they are kept under strict quarantine. In modern Hirudotherapy, leeches are used only once completely eliminating the risk of passing on infections. Leeches have had no prior contact with humans, they are usually fed on poultry blood collected from slaughterhouses that produce meat for human consumption.

The best known advocate of medical leeches, Roy Sawyer, an American researcher, recognised the potential benefits of leeches and in 1984 founded the world’s first large-scale leech farm, Bioparm, in Wales. Today leech farms produce millions of leeches every year.

The number of leeches to be applied is determined on the basis of the desired therapeutic effect, the patient’s condition and age, medical history and possible contraindications. Leeches are kept fasting for at least three months. This period is essential for the animal to feel the need for another meal as leeches’ digestion system is very slow. The hunger they are, the better they attach themselves to the patient’s body. Some common conditions that may prevent the leech from biting onto an area include having a common cold or aged skin. Being a smoker may also increase the risk of failure.

A leech can consume 5-15 ml of blood and falls off spontaneously after sucking for around 20 to 45 minutes.

In normal circumstances leech therapy lasts up to 10 leeches so the patient can lose up to 150 ml of blood during a single treatment.

Despite its numerous benefits, Hirudotherapy is not for everyone, especially those with blood disorders such as haemophilia, leukaemia, low blood pressure, anaemia, HIV and AIDS. Since leech therapy is associated with bloodletting it would put patients with blood disorders at serious risk of bacterial sepsis, thus worsening their condition.

Many people will feel disgusted and scared by the idea of being touched and bitten by a worm that has thirty two brains and three jaws with one hundred teeth on each. This has led many scientists to look for an alternative solution.

“In the case of the leech in medicine, we think we can improve on nature,” says Nadine Connor of the University of Wisconsin. In 2001 Connor helped to develop a mechanical leech. The mechanical leech can perform some of the duties of the real leech. This device, which looks like a small bottle attached to a suction cup, delivers an anti-clotting drug to the damaged tissue and gently sucks out as much blood as is needed. Unlike a real leech, the mechanical version can suck blood until it is turned off. Real leeches drop off by themselves when they become engorged with blood.

The ability of humans to mimic nature has once again proved instrumental, as up to 20% of patients treated with real leeches develop infections caused by Aeromonas Hydrophila. Bacteria that live in the leech’s gut. While these infections can easily be treated with antibiotics, the mechanical leech is always sterile and fully controlled. They can be inserted deep into the tissue where clotted blood is collected while the real leech can only attach to the surface of the skin.

However, those who use bloodletting as a form of treatment still believe in the natural wrigglers. Leeches, they say, are a nearly perfect and self-reproducing surgical tool, adding that the leech’s bite is not nearly as bad as its reputation.
The liver, located on the upper right part of the tummy, is a vital organ with many functions including turning and storing glucose as a fuel for the body, making essential proteins for blood clotting, helping to remove poisons from the body, and making bile which is responsible for digesting fat. It is normal for the liver to contain some fat due to its biochemical functions. However when a large deposit of fat is retained in the liver cells it can lead to ‘fatty liver disease’. Fat accumulated in the liver begins to swell and turn from a healthy reddish-brown to a shiny yellowy colour.

In the developed world the most common cause of this abnormal retention is excessive alcohol. Liver disease due to excessive drinking is now the fifth biggest killer in the UK - the number of deaths has risen by 20 per cent in the past decade. While alcohol consumption of 9.4 litres per adult per year in the United States is considered average, the rate of 13.4 litres per adult per decade. While alcohol consumption of 9.4 litres per adult per year in the United States is considered average, the rate of 13.4 litres per adult per year in the UK is high. Adult per capita consumption is highest in high-income countries and nearly as high in the populous upper-middle-income countries.

In the developing countries the disease has multiple causes. Some 70% of cases worldwide are of Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD). Most of them are in developed countries where sedentary lifestyles and high caloric sugar and fatty diets are the norm, but developing and Muslim countries are also affected.

Although Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease was once mostly associated with age today the main culprit is obesity. In the US there are about six million obese children – mostly Asian and Hispanic – who are extremely susceptible to developing cirrhosis in early adulthood. Recent evidence indicates that NAFLD also increases the risk of heart disease in overweight or obese children.

The frequency of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease among children is 3-10% worldwide, rising to an alarming 40-70% among obese children. If the child’s basic liver disease advances to inflammatory disease and then to cirrhosis, the child may experience symptoms such as yellowing of the skin (jaundice), fatigue, weakness, spider-like blood vessels, swelling of the legs (oedema) or abdominal fasciitis, and mental confusion.

In basic fatty liver disease, only a small amount of fat is stored in the liver cells. For most people this amount does not cause any harm but in others it can progress to more severe forms and this is why it is so important to control the condition.

Another stage of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, Steatohepatitis (NASH), is when excess fat in the liver cells is associated with inflammation which can damage the liver cells. NASH can lead to scarring (fibrosis) and ultimately to cirrhosis. When the number of fibrosis areas increase in the liver tissue, the structure and function of the liver are badly disrupted leading to liver failure and other complications like gastrointestinal bleeding and liver cancer. Most patients suffer from basic fatty liver disease and only a minority of people progress to cirrhosis.

When cirrhosis occurs, the flow of blood from the intestines through the scarred liver is blocked. The blockage of the flow of blood through the liver causes the blood to bypass the liver. The pressure within the bypassing blood vessels increases and the vessels enlarge, rupturing and bleeding profusely. The flow of blood from the intestine that bypasses the liver prevents the liver from removing toxic chemicals produced in the intestine. These toxins are shunted to the brain where they interfere with all of the brain’s functions, ultimately leading to coma.

NASH and NASH are usually silent and do not have any symptoms, especially in the early stages. But over time symptoms such as fatigue, pain in the upper right of the abdomen due to enlarged liver, weight loss or loss of appetite, weakness, nausea, confusion, and patchy, dark skin discoloration on the neck or abdomen may present. There is no standard treatment for fatty liver disease but it can easily be treated by eliminating the underlying cause in the early stages. Diseases like diabetes should be properly treated. If the patient is obese then losing weight gradually is a good choice (not more than one or two pounds a week). Losing 9% of bodyweight over a couple of months can successfully reverse NASH symptoms.

Increasing physical activity and eating a healthy diet while limiting calories is helpful. Foods containing refined, rapidly digested carbohydrates including bread, grits, potatoes, corn and concentrated sugar found in sport drinks and juice should be avoided.

Adding Omega 3 and more fish to daily food is a good way of increasing essential fatty acids and lowering the amount of blood lipids.

Some antioxidants and diabetes medications are suggested as possible medications for NAFLD including Vitamin E, Selenium, Betaine, Metformin, Roziglitazone. Probiotics are the newest suggestions for treating fatty liver disease containing healthy live bacteria or yeasts to counteract unbalanced diets. If cirrhosis becomes severe, a liver transplant may be needed.

Perhaps the most important ‘take home message’ of being diagnosed with NAFLD is not to focus too much on the liver but to concentrate on reducing any risk factors associated with developing cardiovascular problems - the most common cause of illness and death in people with NAFLD. These are very simple and involve basic changes in lifestyle, diet, weight loss, giving up smoking and taking up exercise.
The Science of Replication

After the discovery of DNA, cloning has become a more tangible reality. Ghazaleh Kamran explains the basics of gene cloning and its current applications in medical science.
NA is a double spiral structure that contains our hereditary information. Scientists use the term double helix to describe DNA’s winding two-stranded structure. The location of DNA is in the core (nucleus) of each body cell except the red blood cells which have no nucleus.

Each molecule of DNA transforms into what is called a chromosome and is coiled and supercoiled DNA. Every human cell has 46 chromosomes of which 23 chromo- somes are contributed by the egg and 23 by the spermatozoon. Some parts of the DNA of each chromosome which are called ‘genes’ code anything from eye color to hormones. These are hereditary units and are similar in all humans such as two eyes, two ears and one mouth. Each gene is a chemical code known as ‘genetic code’. These codes are specific to each individual. So while we all have similar genes which make up our body parts, our genetic codes are different and specific to each individual.

The above DNA structure is what makes us different but similar individuals. These codes are essential in the make-up of proteins which are the basis of almost anything in the body. But what the rest of the DNA structure does is still a puzzle.

The collective human genes are called the ‘human genome’. Scientists have documented all the human genome through the detailed Human Genome Project (HGP). Thanks to this discovery the list of genetic codes of the human body is now easily accessible to all concerned.

Sometimes it is necessary to make copies of DNA. One of the most common reasons is to study the DNA associated with the story of Dolly the sheep. However there is more to cloning than just creating similar creatures.

The term cloning has entered common language to indicate counterfeiting, like in the case of credit cards or mobile SIM cards. This term indicates the production of identical copies of something. The term clone is a Greek word meaning ‘twig’, referring to the reproduction of plants from cuttings, a type of cloning practised for thousands of years.

Cloning can happen naturally in the form of twinning. Once an egg is fertilised, it soon starts to divide into more cells. Sometimes, a cell divides into two cells, but these two cells become separated and each one starts to divide into two, then four, then eight cells and so on. It is during this process of cell multiplication that scientists can obtain the all important stem cells.

Stem cells differ from ordinary cells in two important ways. First, they are unspecialised cells capable of renewing themselves through cell division, sometimes after long periods of inactivity. Second, they can be induced under certain conditions to become tissue or organ-specific cells with special functions. In some organs, such as the gut and bone marrow, stem cells regularly divide to repair and replace worn out or damaged tissues. In other organs, however, such as the pancreas and the heart, stem cells only divide under special conditions.

Scientists can obtain stem cells from a variety of sources, but the preferred option is early embryos since young cells have shown to respond better to the cloning process. There are three principal forms of cloning: copying DNA molecules (Molecular Cloning), copying cells (Cellular Cloning) and copying organisms (some organisms reproduce normally in an unusual way such as bacteria, plants, some invertebrate animals that generate identical copies of themselves).

Molecular cloning and cellular cloning do not involve germ cells (egg or sperm) so the cloned cells are not capable of developing into embryos.

These two processes have not prompted any ethical opposition; however the cloning of animal organisms, in particular of mammals such as Dolly, has attracted controversy because of its possible application to humans.

To date research in the production of genetic copies of organisms is aimed at two areas known as reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning.

Reproductive cloning

The aim of reproductive cloning is to create identical individuals. This can be done by Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer (SCNT). In this method, the nucleus of a somatic cell in an egg which is out of nucleus is multiplied in the laboratory. The multiplied cells are then put in the uterus of a receiver. In the case of Dolly, after a specific period, a lamb was born which was genetically the same as the giver of the somatic cell. Reproductive cloning in the case of humans is explicitly forbidden in many countries that have legislated in this field.

Therapeutic cloning

In this method the stem cells, which contain our genes and can develop into any body organ, are used to focus on repairing the unhealthy organs. Stem cells - made from the patient’s own DNA and compatible with the patient’s body - are multiplied in a lab. The cloned cells are then infused into the damaged tissue where they continue 46 chromosomally to the damaged tissue. Perhaps in the future, stem cells can be used for producing fully grown organs.

Therapeutic cloning from embryonic stem cells is considered ethically unacceptable in some countries and allowed with certain controls in other countries such as the UK.

The most problematic ethical issue around cloning is centred on the possibility of human cloning. In 1996, Pope John Paul II decreed that human cloning was immoral. Disapproval of human cloning is not unique to the Catholic Church. Muslim scholars agree that while animal cloning is permissible, cloning human beings is prohibited.

Scientists in the Islamic Republic of Iran successfully cloned their first mammal - a sheep called ‘Roya’ in 2004. Roya was created using the same method as Dolly. Scientists used stem cells obtained from the ear tissue of a male lamb. But Iran has also produced cultured and frozen human embryonic stem cells. Iranian scientists have established human stem cell lines since 2004. Moreover, stem cell research and cloning for therapeutic purposes, which involves cells taken from a fetus, is permissible only using embryos in the ‘pre-embryonic’ stages of foetus development.

In 2003 the Muslim World League’s Islamic Jurisprudence Council conference held in Makkah declared that ‘it is permissible to acquire, grow and use stem cells for therapy or scientific research as long as the cells’ sources are permissible’.

It is forbidden to obtain or use stem cells if their source is forbidden. Examples of this include foetuses intentionally aborted without a legitimate medical reason, intentional fertilisation between a donated ovum and sperm, and thera- peutic cloning.

In May 2013, the prestigious journal Cell published the results of a study by a group of scientists from the Oregon National Research Centre. This study introduced a new element into the equation. By starting from adult skin cells, scientists have been able to create embryonic stem cells with therapeutic potential without the use of embryos. The scientists involved underlined the point that their research ‘is directed to the creation of stem cells to be used to fight diseases’ and cannot be used by others to move forward towards human reproductive cloning.

This could resolve an important ethical issue revolving around the use of embryos providing new hope in regener- ative medicine for major diseases such as Parkinson’s, spinal cord injuries or heart disease and all those conditions which may need a new organ, a new fabric, new neurons etc., without the risk of rejection.

Shahedeh Kamran is a graduate in Cellular and Molecular Biology.
The origin of the Moon: the mystery continues

Hannah Smith examines the scientific evidence of how the Earth gained its Moon

he sighting of the new moon, to determine the beginning of the Islamic months, reminds us of the central role of the Moon in the timing of Islamic rituals; it is the object by which we regulate our calendars, a universal timepiece chosen by God to demarcate time for a universal timeless religion. ‘They ask you about the new moons. Say: These are signs to mark fixed periods of time for mankind and for the pilgrimage [Quran, 2:189].’ Elsewhere the Qur’an also says, ‘It is He who made the sun a lamp, and moon a light and measured stages so you know number of years and count of time.’ (10:5), and ‘Allah is He who raised heavens without pillars that you can see; Then He established Himself on the throne; And He subjected the sun and the moon (to his law); each one runs its course for a term appointed.’ (13:2).

As a constant in the universe the moon is the perfect natural vehicle by which to measure the passage of time and has been used by many peoples including the Chinese, Babylonians, Egyptians and Jews.

But aside from being a timepiece or object of worship, little was known about the Moon itself by scientists until relatively recently. Even today despite being our closest celestial neighbour and the recipient of several manned space visits, scientists are divided about how the Earth obtained its Moon, where it came from and how it was made.

The Moon is the Earth’s nearest celestial body and it’s only natural satellite. It was formed 4.52 billion years ago. It is believed that the Moon was created during the early building phase of the Solar System known as the ‘early accretionary period’ in which rock fragments from the initial proto-planetary disk continued to clump together under the force of gravity to feed the growth of the young proto-planets.

Compared to many of the other moons orbiting the other planets in the Solar System, the Moon has a number of peculiarities: it has a very large size relative to the planet it orbits, it has an elliptical orbit, and its rocks have an almost identical chemical composition to those of terrestrial rocks. These scientific observations make the explanation of the Moon’s origin a moderate challenge.

The earliest scientist to propose a hypothesis for the origin of the Moon was George Darwin, son of the famous biologist Charles Darwin. In 1879, he suggested that the Earth span so fast in the past that it blew apart and some of the debris that detached from the Earth coalesced to form the Moon. Darwin suggested that the Pacific Ocean is a scar of this event, representing an area which was excavated when material was lost; however this idea has since been proven wrong as the icecap crust of the Pacific is too young.

The Great Impact Hypothesis

The most popular explanation for the origin of the moon is the ‘Great Impact Hypothesis’ (GIH) that emerged in the 1970s. The fundamental idea of the GIH is that the moon was formed when another proto-planetary body approximately the same size of Mars, dubbed ‘Theia’, collided with the recently agglomerated proto-Earth during the early accretionary period of the Solar System. Debris blown into surrounding space from the impact accreted to form the Moon. Scientists estimate that the collisional body would have needed to be as big as Mars to account for the combined angular momentum of the Earth and Moon. The GIH is a plausible theory because violent high energy impacts between giant objects would have been common in the early period of the Solar System where unbound rocks and growing embryonic planets1 coalesced around the Solar System before they eventually coalesced to form one of the contemporary planetary bodies. The heat generated by the collision would have caused temperatures to reach up to 10,000°C, liquifying the outer layers of the Earth and Moon to form magma oceans. Melting Earth’s rocks would have created the necessary conditions to allow heavier elements such as iron to sink and form Earth’s iron core. The heating and melting would have also allowed any gases including water vapour trapped in the crystal structures of the rocks to be released. Analyses of Moon rocks generally yield small proportions of volatiles, but there is substantial evidence including the discovery of water by a group of scientists at the University of Notre Dame in February this year, that could threaten the impact hypothesis. Impact models predict that the isotopic signature of the rocks on the Moon should be different to that of the Earth and similar to the collisional body Theia. However results published in 2011 and 2012 show that the isotopic signatures of the most common elements - oxygen, chromium, potassium and silicon - from Moon rocks are almost indistinguishable from terrestrial rocks. It is thought that isotopic compositions vary with distance from the Sun as samples of rock from Mars and Venus, an asteroid that orbits the Sun between Mars and Jupiter, have wildly different oxygen isotopic signatures. Researchers at Caltech estimated the probability of Theia having identical isotopic signatures to Earth to be less than 1%.

A nuclear reactor ejected the Moon

The most outlandish but not impossible idea is the creation of the Moon by a massive natural nuclear reactor buried deep inside the Earth. Scientists are almost certain that natural nuclear reactors or georeactors have existed inside the Earth in the past as relics. Fossilised traces of georeactors measuring 1.5–10 metres across have been found in western Africa and such internal nuclear fossil reactions provide a plausible heat source for the excess heat given out by the Earth. Wim van Westreenen, a planetary scientist at VU University in Amsterdam, and proponent of the georeactor hypothesis, claims that the Moon was formed when a super georeactor being substantially larger than the small fossil reactors found in western Africa went super-critical. The resulting cataclysmic explosion could have blown the world apart with a force 11,000 times greater than the world’s most powerful atom bomb, the Tsar, detonated by the Soviet regime in 1955, or equivalent to 40 million billion atomic bombs of the size dropped on Hiroshima. A number of scientists accept that a nuclear reactor could have formed early in the Earth’s history while the planet was very hot and molten allowing heavy and radioactive elements such as uranium, thorium and plutonium concentrated in dense rocks to sink and accumulate at the Earth’s core-mantle boundary. The georeactor, like the great impact hypothesis, has been shown to provide a plausible explanation for the formation of the Moon. Scientists however continue to search for better explanations of the Moon’s origin, dissatisfied with current versions of these theories that are not entirely able to corroborate challenging scientific observations such as the chemical similarity of the Earth and the Moon.

Hannah Smith is a graduate in Geophysics from Imperial College London and the University of Oxford, and holds a Masters degree in Geology from the University of Michigan. She currently works as a Physics teacher at a secondary school in London.

1. Theia having identical isotopic signatures to Earth to be less than 1%.
Sana’a has been continuously inhabited for over 2,500 years. Its religious and cultural heritage is reflected in its 106 mosques, 12 hammams (bath houses) and 6,500 houses built before the 11th century. The city’s architecture has been damaged, demolished and rebuilt through flooding, wars and prosperity. Yet, it wasn’t until the modernisation in the 1970s that the city’s architectural fabric was truly in danger of disappearing. In the early 1980s, at the request of the Yemeni government, UNESCO launched a successful international campaign to conserve the city. After considerable preservation and rehabilitation efforts, the city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. While conservation efforts have been successful, little has been said to analyse the impact of the resulting tourism and development.

Physical and Historical
Located in the south-western tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Sana’a lies in a fertile basin over two thousand metres above sea level, on a major communication axis that crosses the mountains lasted for nearly two centuries and can still be seen in the quality and quantity of buildings from that time. Most of the domestic architecture still standing in the city dates from this period and later, while the extant mosques reach back well over one thousand years and fragments of towers date to four centuries before the rise of Islam.
Traditional Buildings
Sana’a’s architectural vocabulary was already well formed by the tenth century when Ibn Rustah wrote that most of the houses “are adorned with gypsum, baked bricks, and symmetrical stones.” The architectural heritage of Sana’a consists of multi-storey buildings decorated with geometric shapes and horizontal bands rendered in gypsum, wood, and stone. The architectural tradition of Sana’a is clearly a desirable characteristic in a rapidly growing population, placed at the crossroads of the east and the west.

Impacts of Modernisation
Sana’a has been an important centre in south western Arabia for nearly 2000 years. Until the end of the Yemeni civil war in 1969, the city was closed to outsiders for two centuries, its unique multi-storey buildings protected behind mud walls. A traditional way of life was preserved in a society that values looking after poor people and old animals. The city, though in need of maintenance, was clean and sanitary. The opening of the country to the outside world in the 1970s, and the growth which accompanied the decision to make Sana’a the capital of the new Yemen Arab Republic, posed new challenges to the old city. The huge influx of dollars from the oil boom in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, combined with a rapidly growing population, placed considerable stress on the old city’s historic buildings and its inadequate infrastructure. Sana’a’s growth was extraordinarily fast as oil workers returning home invested their money in property. The population grew from about 55,000 in 1970 to 250,000 in 1982. By 1978 growth was out of control and with the new money came more automobiles. Economic development in Sana’a made the introduction of modern construction techniques, including reinforced concrete structures become eyesores alongside the traditional buildings they were supposed to have adverse effects on traditional construction materials. Concrete’s inflexibility cracked surrounding brick and deposited salts that deteriorated the soft traditional materials. As a result of modernisation efforts in the old city, including the introduction of water and sanitation systems without adequate drainage, thirty historic houses collapsed between 1978 and 1979.

Conservation Philosophy
In reaction to this grave state of ill repair, Yemeni officials and foreign technical advisors working in Sana’a pressed for the conservation of the city. They proposed that the whole town should be saved and that preservation challenges could be solved incrementally. The international community criticised this approach. The main idea was to promote a living city while balancing the needs of conservation and development. Ronald Lewcock, an active advocate of the plan, summed up the primary motivation behind this philosophy: “Its value lies not so much in the merit of the individual buildings, important though they may be, but in the unforgettable impression made by the whole of an entire city of splendid buildings combining to create an urban effect of extraordinary fascination and beauty.”

Since the early 1980s, a campaign to restore and upgrade the city has been ongoing. The campaign, as outlined in a UNESCO publication, presents a strategy to preserve as much of the city’s unique character as possible in order to maintain the city’s sense of age and history. It also aims to ensure the preservation and rehabilitation of the traditional way of life of the modern city as much as possible for those who desire it, without stifling urban life or the population’s desire for change and improved facilities. The plan also provides typical examples of the architectural conservation that is necessary.

Conclusion
Preservation controls have been put in place but are not properly enforced. Perhaps the most bittersweet aspect of successful implementation of the plan is the growth of heritage tourism. The mixed blessing of tourism is that while it introduces new forms of revenue, it displaces residents and substitutes a locally sustainable economy with one reliant on foreign currency. There are considerable worries about the detrimental effects of tourism on historic sites from Uzbekistan to the United Kingdom. Its influence on Sana’a has yet to be properly analysed. Such a study should be conducted soon to avoid returning to the dilapidated state of the city which preservationists faced in the late 1970s.

In the meantime, it is appropriate to recognise the victories of those who have been active in conserving the old walled city of Sana’a. The quality of life has improved, people have moved back, and the streets are now clean. In many ways the preservationists involved have solved what Michael Welbank calls the most intractable conservation problem today: the conservation of a cohesive high-quality urban area. In writing about the challenges of combining conservation and development in Third World countries he suggests that cities take a middle course where both interests come together in a “give and take” policy. It seems that Sana’a has accomplished this balance, ensuring that the city remains populated and, perhaps most importantly, enticing the support and the interest of its citizens in the preservation of the past for future generations.

T. Luke Young has a Bachelor’s degree in Historic Preservation from Roger Williams University, Master’s degrees in Architectural Studies and in Urban Planning, from MIT.
5-6 October 2013
SOAS Palestine Society Conference: Self-Critique, Two Decades after Oslo
9th Annual Conference
In its embrace of self-criticism, the conference will focus on the ways Palestinian leadership and elites have become embedded in the logic of settler colonialism, embraced neoliberal capitalism, and reproduced social and political accommodation of the Oslo process.

Time: 09:00 - 18:00
Venue: BFI Southbank, BFI Imax, and other BFI venues
Web: www.bfi.org.uk/lff
Ticket: £12.50
Price: £12.50

9 October 2013
Education in the Middle East
This session will give a comprehensive overview of the structure of education systems in the Middle East (in Arabic speaking countries including North Africa as well as Iran) covering secondary education, education, vocational studies, higher education, accreditation and recent developments. It will also equip participants to better understand original language documents and identify key features. This course is recommended for higher education admissions staff.

Time: 13:00 - 16:30
Venue: Manchester
Web: www.eccs.co.uk/NAFIC/organisations/training/schedule.aspx
Email: training@nairc.org.uk Telephone: +44 (0)71 330 7305

15 October 2013
Islamic Finance Qualification (IFQ) Course
Simple Sharia Human Capital (SSHC) is offering a unique two-day opportunity to gain the ground-breaking, globally recognised IFQ improving career prospects, giving job focus and enhancing professional capabilities. The course will be delivered by expert training practitioners who have been accredited by the Chartered Institute for Securities and Investments (CISI).

Price: £550
Time: 09:00am - 05:00pm
Venue: London
Web: www.simplyshariaifq3.org/events/online
Email: info@simplysharia.com

24 October 2013
An Anatolian Stonehenge: Göbekli Tepe - Stone Age sanctuaries in south-eastern Turkey
A lecture on new discoveries at Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia dating to 10,000-9000 BC, organised by Nae Annual Memorial Lecture in the religious traditions of the Middle East. Göbekli Tepe is a unique site. After 18 years of excavation, we now know that it is one of the most important archaeo logical sites in the world.

Venue: BP Lecture Theatre, The British Museum
Web: www.britishmuseum.org/whatson/events/calendar/
Ticket: Free, booking essential
Time: 18:30-19:10

29 October 2013
Persian and Islamic Arts: Trans-Cultural Geographies – A Research Seminar
Studying the Stars in Iran: Positioning Al-Sufi’s Book of Constellations in Islamic Art History.

Speaker(s): Dr. Moya Carey
Heritage Foundation Curator for the Islamic Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum

Venue: Lecture Room, Basement, St John’s Church, 73 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY
Price: Free, booking essential
Time: 18:00

Islamic Futures in Post-Normal Times
A lecture by Ziauddin Sardar
Organised by The Association of Muslim Social Scientists, AMSS UK, and the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster.

“At the 9th WIEF, sessions will be adapted to increase delegates’ participation as they explore business and investment opportunities, as well as engage in discourse on topical issues and how best to address them. Key areas of focus at the upcoming forum in London include Islamic banking and finance, technology, infrastructure development, health, exports, education and youth.”

Time: TBA
Venue: University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street
Web: www.amssuk.com/events

Disclaimers: Islam today does not necessarily endorse or recommend any of these events. Their calendars and individuals or groups involved in them. We are not responsible for changes in times, fees, or venues. Further information should be sought directly from the organizers.