



Obama – The Muslims’ Dilemma

By: Raouf Ebeid - PI Online

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While the word “apostasy” is used in Judaism and Christianity, it was Islam that recently gave it notoriety. In the past, the term was used infrequently in articles with a limited audience interested in Islam and its social and political implications. This month however, the word “apostasy” took center stage when a May 12th New York Times article by Edward Luttwak¹ about Barak Obama ignited a controversy.

Luttwak asserts that Muslims will view Obama, an avowed Christian with a Muslim father, turned atheist, as an apostate and, therefore, he concludes that it is unrealistic to hope that as President of the United States Obama could improve relations with world’s Muslims. Thus, like most of the Western media, his interest in the topic appears to be projecting it into U.S. politics, rather than understanding perceptions within the Muslim World. PI Online undertook a search of most Arabic websites and news media and, aside from a few articles reporting on what is being said in the Western press, found no evidence that any major Islamist writer has discussed yet the subject of apostasy in connection with Obama. Nevertheless, it is worth examining the philosophical and sociological factors that may shape such a discussion in the Muslim world.

When it comes to discussing Obama’s religious roots, there is no doubt that the lack of consensus among Muslims reacting to an Obama’s presidency would be as great as that which presently exists within the Jewish community in the U.S. and abroad on the subject. Radicals who identify with Bin Ladin and Zawahiri would categorically consider Obama, or any other U.S. president, as evil. The charge of apostasy would simply be added to the existing list of reasons radicals use for condoning violence against the West in any form. I would suggest, however, that aside from this relatively small group, the majority of Muslims, regardless of how much they criticize the U.S., would initially project a much more complex attitude towards an Obama presidency. These complex, contradictory feelings may explain, in part, why writers in the Muslim world have yet to express their view of Obama generally, or discuss the question of apostasy in particular.

Another recent event – the Hizbullah-Israel war in Lebanon – may shed some light on the ambivalence Muslims would feel in the face of an Obama presidency. Before the war, many Sunnis portrayed the Shi’a as belonging to an evil sect, worse in their eyes than the Christians and the Jews. After the war, Sunni Muslims in almost all Arab countries had no problem championing the Shi’a Hizbullah because they were perceived as having won, or at least held their ground, against the mighty Israeli army. Sunni writers, reflecting the sentiment in the Arab streets, went to great lengths to call for unity among Sunni and Shi’a. Those events illustrate the power of Muslim desire to identify with the victorious. The thrill of success is more compelling than ideology.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/opinion/12luttwak.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=%93President+Apostate%2C%94+Edward+Luttwak&st=nyt&oref=slogin

Thus, I believe Mr. Luttwak is mistaken in his superficial analysis of the Muslim mind. From a religious perspective, Muslims may struggle to come to terms with Obama, but I believe that most will go to great lengths to identify with the leader of the United States of America. I spoke last week to a high official in a Middle Eastern country who viewed the prospect of an Obama presidency positively, although he was not optimistic about his chances. But, in my view, should Obama be given that chance, the opportunity to improve relations with the world's Muslims will be his to lose.

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