

Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism, by Karima Bennoune. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015

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In a world marked by the proliferation of violent jihadi groups, what can be done to turn the tide against Muslim fundamentalism? This question lies at the heart of Karima Bennoune's *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*. Bennoune's award-winning book focuses on the struggles against such extremism *within* Muslim majority societies, "one of the most important – and overlooked – human rights struggles in the world" (3). Fuelled by a vision of ending fundamentalism and its violence, Bennoune aims to amplify the reach of those people whose actions are most critical in the struggle against Muslim fundamentalism, yet whose voices are barely audible in the global arena:

Whether believers, agnostics, freethinkers, or atheists, they do this by representing some of the Muslim traditions' greatest values – mercy, compassion, peace, tolerance, study, creativity, openness. They do this not by mouthing platitudes about "Islam-religion-of-peace" but in many cases by putting their lives on the line to fight fundamentalism.

(Bennoune, 2015: 9)

As a human rights lawyer, Bennoune has, for several decades, "collect[ed] nightmares for a living in order to combat abuse" (27). *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* is based on first-hand witness accounts and conversations with people from 20 countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and beyond. Mindful of context, Bennoune provides political analysis whilst simultaneously being sensitive to the pain and emotional intensity that reliving experiences of violence produces in the people she meets. "With this research, I again became the woman who makes people weep" (27). Yet tears are not the sole feature of these encounters; the determination of Bennoune's respondents

to tell their stories spurs her on. She notes that first-hand witness accounts have particular strengths and weaknesses, which she tries to corroborate where necessary and possible. These accounts are interwoven with Bennoune's own profound observations and reflections on her odyssey, not least the starting point of her journey – the early morning pounding by members of the Armed Islamic Group on the door of her father's apartment in Algeria on the 29 June 1993.

It is not Bennoune's aim to convey the full complexity of Muslim fundamentalism in any one country. Instead, she navigates the wide geographic range of her material in eleven chapters that lay out thematic commonalities – fundamentalist efforts to eradicate artists and their work, cultural space, journalists and their writing, women and their freedom – as well as the specificities of particular contexts and phenomena: Algeria, Iran, a Somali community in Minneapolis, Al Qaeda, the Arab Spring and Fall, and northern Mali. Although written with a Western audience primarily in mind, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* is relevant to many more people in the global South. Bennoune takes care to write about challenges to Muslim fundamentalism in a way that will not be used against Muslims, in view of the widespread lack of knowledge in the West about the diversity of contexts within which Islam is practised and the increasing levels of discrimination against Muslims.

Given the differing relationships of her respondents to Islam as a religion and their varied positioning along a range of social markers, Bennoune eschews the simple term “Muslim” to refer to them all, preferring instead the phrases “people of Muslim heritage or culture” and “Muslim majority societies”. These, she observes, afford “more space for... messy lived realities” (11). Such lived realities are brought to light through Bennoune's conversations with witnesses across a wide social spectrum. In addition to artists and cultural workers of different kinds, there are journalists, writers, medical doctors, lawyers, psychologists, trade unionists, workers, drivers, academics, students, imams, women's rights activists, housewives, grandmothers, sexual rights activists, activists in wheelchairs, businesswomen, members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda, sheiks, bloggers, politicians, former prisoners, former hostages, victims of terrorism, judges, teachers, schoolchildren, community organisers, young and old revolutionaries. Not only are these respondents politically diverse – centrist as well as liberal and left-wing – they also speak in “a Babel

of languages – various dialects of Arabic, Tamazight, Hausa and Zarma/Songhai, Bamanankan, Urdu, Russian, Wolof, Dari, Persian, Pashto, Somali and French, just to name a few” (12).

The title of the book comes from a line in the play *Bulha* by the Pakistani playwright Shahid Nadeem. Bulha Shah, the play’s central protagonist, was a renowned Sufi mystic poet who struggled against the mullahs of the early eighteenth century. Declared a heretic in his time, Bulha’s open questioning and rejection of the Sharia is transposed onto current events in Pakistan. When Bulha’s followers are assaulted by zealots for singing Sufi devotional music that “is against Islam”, according to the decree of a religious teacher, one of the followers replies: “Your fatwas do not apply here” (40). The play is one of the theatre company Ajoka’s most popular performances. This is just one of the many instances of artistic and creative work discussed by Bennoune. When jihadists declare war on music, theatre, art – expressions of freedom of thought and the ability to create – the not-so-simple act of continuing to produce and perform one’s art becomes an act of courage. From Pakistan to Afghanistan to Algeria and beyond, the makers of art and the keepers of cultural spaces work at the interface of politics and creative expression to resist fundamentalism, survive extremism and pursue cultural change.

Central to the totalitarian project of Muslim fundamentalism is the control and subordination of women: their bodies, sexualities, dress, mobility, their very presence. All the activists fighting for women’s human rights refer to this obsession with control, and their work challenges it in myriad ways. Women’s human rights defenders are thus “one of the most important forces contesting fundamentalism” (82). Contradictions within fundamentalist projects abound. In Algeria, Bennoune points out that there is *no* documentation at all of the rapes of women during the 1990s. She asks why documenting the rapes perpetrated by fundamentalist armed groups in Algeria was considered blasphemy when the rapes themselves were not.

Collective struggles for women’s rights take place across and within national boundaries, with “patriarchs, militarists, racists and fundamentalists” as their common foes (91). Zaynab ElSawi, coordinator of Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), recounts how women’s protests against the flogging sentence given to journalist Lubna Hussein, for daring to wear trousers in public, led to the commuting of her sentence. This happened after the protesters sent messages across the world when they themselves

were arrested and sent to jail. Senegalese human rights activist and novelist Aissatou Cissé is “uncompromising”, from her wheelchair, in her campaigns against the stoning of women, against child marriage and in her struggle for the rights of disabled women and girls.

The international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) was founded in the 1980s by Marieme Hélie-Lucas, a stalwart of the Algerian independence movement. Although an atheist herself, Hélie-Lucas argues that women who argue from a secular perspective should be allies with those who seek to make progressive interpretations within religious discourse, in view of the power of their shared enemy. Fatou Sow, Senegalese professor of sociology, is the current coordinator of WLUML. Sow’s concern about her country is the fading away of a secular discourse from which to resist fundamentalism. Although she thinks the choice of strategy for challenging fundamentalism should be contextually determined, she refuses to engage from within a religious discourse in Senegal because, she argues, the struggle is political, not religious.

Violent fundamentalist abuses have fuelled state atrocities. “Neither justifies the other, but to understand what was happening in Algeria, you have to consider both” (317). The antihuman violence of Muslim fundamentalist armed groups goes against international as well as Islamic humanitarian law. States, too, have abused human rights in the name of combating terrorism. Bennoune argues that it is critical to challenge both the atrocities by Muslim fundamentalist armed groups as well as the abusive responses to such atrocities by governments: “we have to combat several forms of suffering simultaneously, rather than tolerating either one in the name of the other” (239). Whilst international human rights organisations often fail to grasp this point, many local human rights defenders are the ones to try and steer a path through this fraught terrain in their challenges to fundamentalism. Bennoune is very clear that her own position is one of support for an “effective and robust political struggle against fundamentalism, but not one that disregards the rule of law” (320).

The multifarious voices expressed in *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* reinforce Bennoune’s position that Muslim fundamentalism “is one of the most truly transnational fundamentalisms, notable for the ubiquity of its adherents and the sophistication and reach of its vicious armed groups” (14). The violence of Algerian fundamentalists began when the first Algerians

returned from Afghanistan. Similar transnational movements of ideologies, resources and practices took place elsewhere in Africa, including Somalia and northern Nigeria. Whilst Algerian jihadists misapplied the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, the 13th century Islamic scholar, his work has also been appropriated by other extremists such as Mohammed Yusuf, a key figure in the formation of Boko Haram.

Saudi Arabia and Saudi funding remain a key aspect of the growth of fundamentalism throughout the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. In all the places she visited, Bennoune emphasises, the people whom she met made this point. Wahhabi influence is felt across the world, a shift that began after the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf War in 1991. And yet, Saudi Arabia remains a key ally of the USA and of Britain. Economic interests in the supply of oil combine with military interests in the sale of arms. Between 2011 and 2015, Britain sold more arms to Saudi Arabia than to any other country¹ and the USA, under the Obama administration, sold the kingdom weapons worth \$112 billion, to be paid over a period of eight years.² Supplying Saudi Arabia with arms compounds the endorsement of its brutal regime that is already provided by both the USA and British governments turning a blind eye to its export of Wahhabi ideology across the globe. In the Afterword to the 2013 publication of *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*, Bennoune writes of her conviction that turning the tide against Muslim fundamentalism everywhere requires its defeat in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran. “We must staunch the flow of oil dollars from the Gulf to would-be emirs and ayatollahs everywhere” (Bennoune, 2015: 345).

Cherifa Kheddar, one of Algeria’s foremost human rights advocates, stresses that “instead of just battling terrorism, you must fight fundamentalism. Fundamentalism makes the bed of terrorism... They will not lack recruits, as long as there are young people indoctrinated...” (175). Societies impoverished by unequal global relations, neoliberal economic policies as well as corrupt and unjust governance at home will continue to provide the disenfranchised young men and women who join jihadi movements. Moreover, fundamentalists have been quick to capitalise on popular uprisings they did not start, as was the case in Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood won the elections after the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. In northern Mali, a revolt by Tuareg separatists was followed by the takeover of fundamentalist groups that had been infiltrating the region since the 1990s: Al Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO (the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) and Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) (299–301). French intervention in the Malian case raises the fraught question of the risks of international intervention relative to non-intervention.

The transnational solidarity that is critical for challenging Muslim fundamentalism will require, at the very least, making an effort to understand the complexities of specific contexts in which Muslim fundamentalism prevails. Bennoune’s odyssey shows just how central anti-fundamentalist voices *within* those contexts are, “but they are rarely the ones with the loudspeakers” (334). Changing this dynamic means recognising and supporting those voices in the first place. At the heart of this struggle lies the pursuit of women’s rights: “one must be absolutely committed to women’s full equality and not tolerant of an exemption for ‘Muslim women’ from the human category that includes everyone else” (340). *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* is a compelling and inspirational book, one that will remain important for a long time to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Norton-Taylor, R. 2016. “Saudi Arabia Leads Surge in Arms Imports by Middle East States”, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2016. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/22/saudi-arabia-surge-arms-imports-middle-east>.
- 2 Riedel, B. 2017. “The \$110 Billion Arms Deal to Saudi Arabia is Fake News”, *Brookings*, 5 June. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/05/the-110-billion-arms-deal-to-saudi-arabia-is-fake-news>.