



**Cultural Insecurity: Where  
Lies the Threat?**

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**Received :** 16 August 2017  
**Accepted:** 21 November 2017

Turnitin - passed research



### Abstract

In Cultural Security conferences and tea party drawing room discussions, there seems to be much concern about two particular issues on the subject: the articulation of an accurate definition of 'culture', and identifying the external threats to the same. Extremely complicated definitions are obsessed over, and thus, much time and effort is expended on what seems to be an endless pursuit.

The United Nations may define culture in a particular way, dictionaries in another and learned professors in their way, but in the wake of this intellectual wrestling, the bottom line is that whatever it may entail, culture is, simply put, a way of life.

Then, in the twists and turns of the intellectual jousting regarding what aspects of the human existence may be included in or excluded from it, the issue of security is considered, and the default stress seems to primarily be placed on the 'external' forces as being the greatest threat. It is rare for one to hear participants and others who are concerned about their cultural security, to lay equal, let alone greater, stress on the factors of the internal threat to their culture.

**Keywords :** *cultural security , extremism, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, White Caucasian professionals, religio-cultural encroachments*

## Introduction

The basic definition of religion, or deen, is the same as that of culture: it is a way of life. In Muslim communities and societies, Islam seems to have arrived at a crossroads in the hearts of its people: many, particularly the older generation, it seems, are beginning to harbour a disdain for it, while the young seem to be increasingly drawn towards it. In other words, in the life of the latter, Islam apparently now takes precedence, and thus, it becomes their new way of life, their new culture. In the case of those already born into it, the deen should, by definition, be the priority in their mores, etiquette and mindset, but the expected manifestation of the same in practice tends not to be fully apparent. This may then beg the following questions: is religion – Islam (for the purpose of this paper), the Deen-e-Ilahi – actually not what it propounds itself to be? For, if it were the favoured way of life, is what is actually observed in lands predominantly populated by Muslims, Allah's (swt) recommended way of life? If it is not, then the faults observed within an "Islamic" society tend to be placed by the Muslims on external conspirers. But where lies the cultural insecurity?

## Discussion

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), a sense of security is a basic human requirement. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Holy Qur'an makes repeat references to it. For instance:

"The righteous [will be] amid gardens and fountains [of clear-flowing water]. [Their greeting will be] 'Enter ye here in peace and security.'" (Surah Al-Hijr, 45-46).

"There can they call for every kind of fruit in peace and security" (Surah Ad-Dukhan, 55).

"Will ye be left secure, in [the enjoyment of] all that ye have here?" (Surah Ash-Shu'ara, 146).

According to Tuhaf-ul-Uqul, Imam Mahdi (as) is reported to have said: "I am indeed the security for the inhabitants of the earth." Shia

Muslims in particular make supplications on a daily basis for the hastening of his (as) reappearance in their quest for the security of their way of life that only he (as) is believed to be able to deliver in the future after he assumes apparent government over the world.

However, a point to ponder is why this much awaited saviour (as) does not seem to return from his occultation despite extended centuries of injustices being prevalent in the world against the Shia and non-Shia alike. On the one hand, it is said that the Imam (as) will reappear when the Muslim ummah is prepared to receive him; yet, the ummah seems to await his reappearance first before, by some miracle, they think their insecurities will be addressed and that thus will “Islam” gain dominance over the world.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the way Allah’s justice works, for in the Holy Qur’an, He (swt) clearly states:

“...surely Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition; and when Allah intends evil to a people, there is no averting it, and besides Him they have no protector” (Surah ar-Rad, Verse 11).

It is a fact that Muslims today around the world tend to be in a spotlight of ridicule, and are regarded as second class citizens by their own kind, leave alone others. A case in point could be how the White Caucasian professionals in Muslim lands are treated like royalty, as if it is a privilege to employ them, and as if by virtue of their accepting offers of work, the Muslims feel a favour having been bestowed upon them. On the other hand, the perks and privileges accorded to the non-White, non-Caucasian denizens of the world are either a third or half of what is offered to the Caucasian race. This disdain is none-too-often not only laughed at, but also exploited by the “West”. This is but a case in point of the weakness of the “Muslim” ummah themselves.

Therefore, it is pertinent that every individual – the intellectual and the so-called commoner alike – self-reflect, what in Arabic is called muhassiba: where does the threat to the cultural insecurity of the Muslims actually lie – is it external or internal? If it is the former, then is it not one that is invited? And by that count, is that external exploitative threat not a consequence of an internal weak-

ness of the Muslims – one that is based on sheer prejudice about the skin and eye colour of their own “kind”, in addition to a hubris drawn from a superiority complex over their own kind as to race and heritage?

It is very clearly stated in the Holy Qur’an in Surah Baqarah that Satan will lie in wait for those who do not cling to the rope of Allah (swt); that he, the accursed, will attack the “believers” from the left, right, aft and asunder. Could it be then that it is the Muslim Ummah who expose their underbelly, as it were, for attack by the already-ambushing external threat of the “Kuffar”, or “satanic forces” as they are labelled – who would lie in wait anyway? Interestingly, this ambushing could be regarded as the wont of Muslims in general too, given the nature of mankind in this ‘dog eat dog’ world.

This could be considered from a macrocosmic as well as microcosmic perspective. In the case of the former, a quick glance at the relationships among Muslim states reveals attempts at religio-cultural encroachments upon one another: for example, the contest between Shia (Iran) and Wahabi “Islam” (Saudi Arabia). While the Wahabi version may have been propped up by the British and American covert state machinery, the fact remains that they did not invent it – they only exploited a strand of “Islam” very much followed by some Arabs who were already present in Najd in the Arabian Peninsula. One could also cite what may be regarded as a rather simplistic illustration: when Muslims keep monies and precious items in banks, who do they keep them safe from – the threat of thieves from overseas or inland? The point is that Muslims need to curtail themselves from scapegoating the “West” for the maladies of cultural depreciation that may afflict their lands, and instead clean up their own house first. Since Allah (swt) is ever-Merciful and Beneficent, and His promises are true, it would be quite safe to state that it is Muslims themselves who are a greater threat to their culture from within than from outside; it may be that they themselves are the reason why they may generally be disrespected and unvalued.

To expand on this, the case of an eloquent undergraduate Iraqi student (who was also a journalist) at a local Iraqi university could

be considered. At a Q&A seminar at the university's English Language department, regarding problems of Iraq, he said that there was no way that the Iraqis could address their severe issues because corruption in the land was rampant and that he had come to the conclusion that only someone from "outside", that is, the West, could sort them out. It was surprising to hear this coming from an Iraqi young man considering the fact that the same West had literally been involved in the bombing of his very country, directly or indirectly, in addition to imposing economic and even medical sanctions, for in excess of two decades.

By 1996, during the economic embargo on Iraq, when 500,000 Iraqi infants had died due to a lack of essential necessities such as milk and medicines, the then US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was asked for her thoughts on the matter, and she replied, "...the price was worth it". During the "Western" bombing campaign against neighbouring Lebanon in 2006, the then US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, was quoted as saying that the death and destruction thus caused were the "birth pangs of a new Middle East".

In 2017, at the same Iraqi university where the Dutch ambassador to Iraq was invited to address local students, he was asked whether the Netherlands would support an Iraqi demand that the US pack up its military bases and leave their country; that is, whether he would be willing to go on camera and make a statement that the will of the Iraqi people be respected. The ambassador diplomatically responded that the matter was up to the Iraqis and Americans to decide, but that he would also like to mention Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. The student responded by saying that she had specifically asked about the American occupation but that she understood that the ambassador could not clearly state that his country would support the Iraqis' fundamental right to be free of occupation from the United States, a foreign occupying military power, because the Netherlands was an American ally.

The point of these examples, albeit political ones, is as follows: there is little that anyone from outside can or will do to offer support to a nation unless it is in their own interest first; and therefore, the only real way a people can affect their security, cultural for the

purpose of this essay, is by first improving their own condition by themselves. After all, it is not a Zionist conspiracy, or the lack of help from the West, that while Muslims are generally able to maintain their saf, standing in line during congregational prayers – a practice afforded to them five times a day, 365 days a year, no less – but yet they are unable to resolve a simple issue such as lane discipline on their roads.

It seems this rather “Waiting for Godot” has done Muslims significant harm – the “evil” that they seem to have invited upon themselves – such that they have regressed by decades in terms of general civic sense when compared with what are regarded as developed countries; and it is this, at times lack of basic civic sense, which has generally come to be understood as part of Muslim culture.

In some other parts of the Muslim world, it has become a “culture” to snatch food from one another when it is being distributed in the name of Imam Husayn (as) during Muharram. This often happens soon after the lamentations of the events of Kerbala have been recited, and people have wept at the tragedy; for instance, even though people attending a lecture might have just heard that upon being told by Zaynab binte Ali (sa) that the youngest person has first right to food and drink, how Sakina binte Husyan (sa), despite her own intense thirst, searched for her baby brother, the slain Ali Asghar (as) to offer him her share of water, people still push one another in order to snatch food that is being distributed, preventing it from reaching some other outstretched hand.

All this begs the question whether it is some consultancy firm from the “developed” world that needs to be employed to educate the Muslims on basic rights and etiquette – when even sound guidance from a minbar such as that of Imam Husayn (as) does not seem to be internalised. Both the discerning believer and the non-believer could wonder whether such behaviour is part of the “cultural etiquette” of Islam. Since that is not the case, the Muslims need to consider whether they themselves are a threat to their deen – the way of life taught by the Ahlulbayt (as). At the same time, they need to regard whether what they follow is actually that Deen-e-Ilahi or not in the first place.

It seems it is for such situations also that Allah (swt) in the Holy Qur'an reminds believers again:

“Behold! you are those who are called upon to spend in Allah's way, but among you are those who are niggardly, and whoever is niggardly is niggardly against his own soul; and Allah is Self-sufficient and you have need (of Him), and if you turn back He will bring in your place another people, then they will not be like you” (Surah Muhammad, 38).

In light of these well-known verses, it is clear that Allah (swt) is reminding Muslims, or believers, that instead of busying themselves with looking for scapegoats for their problems, and then relaxing and waiting for Imam Mahdi (as), or Godot, or a consultancy firm from the West to resolve corruption, ill-discipline, impatience, unprofessionalism and lethargy, the believers must first look within themselves, and their nations as a whole, to improve their condition, before passing on the blame to some external “satan”. Other-

wise, other nations will be made dominant over them – and that is exactly what seems to have occurred over the last few centuries.

In the Holy Qur’an, Allah (swt) swears by the declining day – and what choice of symbolism this could be – in what may be regarded as somewhat unambiguous verses so that even a lay person, as it were, can easily comprehend:

“Most surely man is in loss; Except those who believe and do good, and enjoin on each other truth, and enjoin on each other patience” (Surah Asr, 2-3).

Imam Ali (as) is attributed to have said: "You think you are a small entity, but within you is enfolded the entire Universe". Surely, at that time, he (as) was addressing his Arab audience, not “Western”.

### Conclusion

Instead of looking outward at where the threat and its risks to cultural security might lie, it is paramount that Muslims look inward so as to identify the real threat to their cultural security. This can be accomplished by engaging in self-accountability both as individuals and collectively as a nation, or nations; then seek, internalise and practise the true teachings of the Ahlulbayt (as) in their daily lives and secure the same; after which they might look outward for inspiration, and ward off any threats, for the answers and teachings lie within the guidance given by Allah (swt) in the Holy Qur’an and by the Ahlulbayt (as).

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