



## Chronicle of a Death Foretold Spotlight on Fundamentalism: The Exception or the Norm



Most western politicians and analysts are typically careful to frame their criticism of fundamentalism or extremism by making the assumption that Islamic violence and extreme Taliban-style governments would only be supported by a very limited portion of the Muslim population. That assumption, which most people appear to believe is valid, was challenged yesterday in an article by *Ma'mun Fendi* who provides what he considers to be disturbing facts in support of his

thesis.

### Al-Jazeera Poll on the Algerian Massacre

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007 *Al-Qaeda* in the Maghreb assumed responsibility for two suicide bombings in Algeria, which killed 26 innocent people and injured more than 150. Writing on the incident, *Fendi* railed against the incendiary poll conducted by the *Al-Jazeera* news organization asking the public to answer Yes or No to the question: "Are you in agreement with the attacks perpetrated by *Al-Qaeda* in Algeria?" Although *Al-Jazeera* stopped polling in response to criticism, *Fendi* makes the point that "it seemed astonishingly acceptable in our present [Islamic/Arab] culture, for a news media to conduct such a poll" asking people if they are for or against terrorist acts. As *Fendi* points out, however, the results of the opinion poll are even more shocking than the fact that the question was asked in the first place. Out of 30,010 responses 16,402 (54.7%) expressed support for *Al-Qaeda's* actions, while 13,608 (45.3%) expressed disapproval. Looking at the results, *Fendi* decries the mindset of "a population bound on justifying the killing, bombing and murdering of civilians without expressing denunciation or surprise." **PI Online notes that, compared to other news organizations like "Al-Arabiya," Al-Jazeera's readers and commentators generally lean towards fundamentalism, which may have biased the results of the poll.** Nevertheless, *Fendi* points out that, if one accepts the poll results as indicative of *Al-Jazeera's* entire audience, which it boasts is 30 million people, the fact that approximately 16.5 million people might condone terrorism is obviously very disturbing.

*Fendi* said that it comes as no surprise that *Al-Qaeda* rejoiced over the results of the opinion poll and has published them on their websites. In a role reversal, *Al-Qaeda's* actions became the norm while those opposed to *Al-Qaeda* were labeled extremists. *Fendi* called on all "Islamists writers" to address this issue which he says transgressed the limits of acceptable human behavior, let alone the professional conduct of the media.

### Bhutto's murder, the Pakistani situation and the Arab media

In the same article, *Fendi* contrasts the 24-hour coverage of Bhutto's assassination in Western media to the almost non-existent coverage by some satellite stations in the Arab world, which he refers to as "the sites of death." He surmises that, as far as the Islamic world was concerned, Bhutto's assassination was a foregone conclusion, making it a non-event. *Fendi* compares the Bhutto tragedy to the murder depicted in Gabriel Garcias Marquez's novel "Chronicle of a Death

Foretold."<sup>1</sup> **Like Marquez, in Fendi's eyes, the psyche of an entire silent society rather than a single murderer is guilty of the crime.**

The author then takes a look at how *Al-Qaeda*, the Islamists and the religious schools in Pakistan have contributed to the expansion of violence. He attributes this problem to two separate issues. First, he emphasizes that Islam is not the cause of violence. Rather, the culprit is the backwardness of the country's population, who happen to be Muslims. In his view, such circumstances would have produced the same results in any country regardless of the religion. Second, he makes the novel argument based on the complexity of the Arabic language, which the language of the *Qaran*. He argues that it is possible for the citizens of South East Asia to misunderstand the religion because they do not speak Arabic. **Unfortunately, Fendi fails to justify his position in light of the *Al-Jazeera* poll of a Muslim population fluent in Arabic.**

*Fendi* argues that without enlightened people like Bhutto, Pakistan would soon fall under the Taliban regime. He also concludes that is true of other Islamic societies. *Fendi* therefore urges the world to stand by enlightened and courageous individuals such as Bhutto. Even though he considers them a minority of Muslims, he views them as the only barrier between a world in which a murder such as Bhutto's is accepted as a natural event and a world in which societies reject the slaughtering of individuals and those who would glorify the murderers **(apparently another reference to *Al-Jazeera*, which Fendi sees as an irresponsible news organization).**

*Fendi* also argues that resistance movements born out of the political and cultural inequalities between Islamic countries and stronger neighbors who are religiously and ethnically different, as in the case of India/Pakistan and Israel/Arab World, ultimately give birth to resistance movements which evolve into Taliban-style movements. The killing of Bhutto, like the killing of Anwar Sadat, he states, was the result of the emergence of such movements which, unable to confront or defeat outside enemies, turn their violent actions inward. *Fendi* speculates that the murder of President *Musharaf* or his only remaining rival *Nuwaz Sherif* could become part of the continuous saga of "violence foretold" in the Islamic world.

***Fendi's* article delves into subjects that are normally treated as tabu in the Muslim world and deserve more attention by other serious analysts writing on Islam and the Middle East. The article was carried by *Asharq Al-Awsat* and immediately picked up by *Al-Arabiya*, making it available to a wide Arab-speaking audience. Unfortunately, by presenting his own untested hypotheses about the role of language and education in the rise of violence in Islam, *Fendi* provided fodder for his critics. Many commentators picked apart his statements on those subjects while ignoring his premise, based on the *Al-Jazeera* poll, that the conventional wisdom about the level of support for Taliban-style regimes or violence in the Muslim world may be incorrect. As the debate continues, it will be interesting to see whether many Muslim's like *Fendi* are disturbed by the results of *Al-Jazeera* poll or prefer not to question the conventional wisdom.**

Source: Author : Ma'mun Fendi – Date : 12/31/2007

**Asharq Al- Awsat:** <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=451920&issue=10625>

**Al-Arabiya :** <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2007/12/31/43588.html>

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<sup>1</sup> "Chronicle of a Death Foretold" takes place in a small town where everyone knew in advance that a murder was going to happen, but no one intervened to stop it.

