

The Terrorist Mindset in Yasmina Khadra's The Sirens of Baghdad

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Summary: This paper offers a close and critical reading of Yasmina Khadra's novel *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008). The selected novel evokes important questions on the nature of terrorism in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. It gives a truthful description of the rise of fundamentalism and how young Muslims are transformed into religious fanatics. Literature on terrorism offers insights into the nature of terrorism and with the gradual escalation of violence in recent years, it has attempted to provide an answer to the question that mystifies the whole world: what leads young men, some of whom highly educated, others well-off, to voluntarily throw themselves to what the West sees ironically as mere death and suicide. Therefore, this paper examines ways in which Khadra's novel can help broaden understandings of terrorism in Iraq. In other words, we intend to use *The Sirens of Baghdad* as a focal point and guide to explore the motives and ideas behind the sociopolitical and psychic act of terrorism. We attempt to offer a qualitatively different understanding of the more fundamental aspects of suicide bombing, including its nature, impact, and the policy responses it triggers. Furthermore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the writer's attempt to bridge the line between the East and West and engage in the dialogue concerning terror-wreaking in Iraq. While certainly not excusing the terrorists' violent acts, the writer has tried to correct some popular ideas about terrorists most of which have been fuelled by falsehoods and misinformation.

Key Words: Terrorism, Jihad, Literature, Psychoanalysis, Religion



Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the

observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents... Thus fiction is nearer truth...A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.

Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 19.

Extreme times call for extreme reactions and extreme writings. Indeed, throughout history, terrorism has bedeviled and threatened humanity, it has been described, rendered into words and analyzed by sociologists, psychoanalysts, historians as well as authors. As Conrad puts it in the quote above, literature is first-hand impressionism, based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena rather than documents; therefore, it could be a better source to explore motivations, ethics, and communicative strategies as well as social and political reverberations of terrorism than pontificating by politicians, historians and media.

Our modern time is a fertile ground for violence intended to effect political change, terrorism thus served as a ready topic for literary writing. Literature finds its genesis and nourishment in responding to the fears and to the facts of modern terrorism and illuminating its murky social, political, and religious realities. Many novelists tried to penetrate the minds of terrorists and understand what they are angry about. They attempt to reveal the human side of terrorists; however, if they suggest any sympathy with any of their grievances, they are not in any way tolerating or justifying their murderous activities.

With the gradual escalation of violence in the recent years, modern literature attempts to give an answer to the question that mystifies both the West and the Muslims: what leads young men some of them highly educated, some extremely open to the mundane aspects of life, others well-off, to voluntarily throw themselves to what the West sees ironically as mere death and suicide.

Therefore, literature took the task of investigating the root causes of terrorism in order to exorcise this devil of horror. Certainly, the role of the terrorism in the literary realm is a worthy subject of academic study.

We attempt to offer in this article a close and critical reading of Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008) in which he evokes important questions on the nature of terrorism in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003. The novel gives a truthful description of the emergence of fundamentalism and how young Muslims are transformed into religious fanatics. It invites readers to have a journey in the minds of ordinary men and to witness their collapse and fall into the abyss of horror and terror.

Mohamed Moulesshoul, penname Yasmina Khadra, adopted his wife's name to protect himself. Khadra said, "In 1988, I was brought before a tribunal. As an officer, I already exerted considerable self-censorship. The situation was becoming unbearable" (Feehily 20). Khadra spent thirty six years in the Algerian army until he revealed his real identity as Mohammed Moulessehoul in a book *L'écrivain (The Writer)* published in 2001. After disclosing his true identity, Khadra faced a moral dilemma, mainly because of the French press, which suspected him of being involved in what is called the "Dirty War."

Terrorism in Khadra's narratives is both a moral issue and an artistic experiment. Khadra belongs to the most famous Algerian writers of individual suffering and collective mourning. He was considered one of the fifty world's most influential Arabs during 2011, and the ambassador of the Arab world with twenty two books published in thirty three languages and four million copies sold all over the world, from Algiers to Tokyo, from Abu Dhabi to London. Critics consider him as an expert because of his talent and the ability to understand man wherever he is (Riding 1).

Khadra's oeuvre evokes important questions on the nature of terrorism. He started his career with a series of novels that unravel the social, economic and political complexities of extremism like *Double Blanc* (2000) and *Morituri* (1999). Six of his novels treat of the subject of extremism. They give a truthful description of the emergence of fundamentalism and how young Muslims are driven to join the insurgency.

What Makes Terrorists Tick

In their attempt to understand what motivates suicide bombers, many theorists focus on ideology. Randy Borum, for example, identifies a four-stage process in the development of extremist beliefs. According to his theory, a group or an individual first identifies an undesirable state

of affairs; then frames that state as unfair; then puts the blame on a target policy, person, or nation; and finally vilifies the responsible party so that aggression seems justified (8). Those who suffer regard themselves as victims of injustice, not as ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ people. Psychologically speaking, this, therefore, justifies the aggression against those who did them wrong.

Accordingly, those who are driven by religious ideology, have been indoctrinated at an early age about the spiritual importance of purifying the world and sacrificing their lives to a holy war, maintain that God has sent them on a mission on earth in order to spread the idea that suicide bombing is a noble and Godly act. Their rationale is that by blowing themselves up in a crowd of people, they are making themselves martyrs and forging their own gateway to heaven (Shuman “What Makes Suicide Bombers Tick?”).

For other theorists, becoming a terrorist or suicide bomber is largely a matter of socialisation. According to Jessica Stern, terrorists are often individuals who feel frustrated by their life circumstances or about the political climate in which they live or those who feel deeply humiliated and confused about their future path. Humiliation, poverty, and hopelessness often give rise to a sense of outrage and desperation, which can be harnessed by extremist leaders to create support for a terrorist movement. For individuals who feel deeply alienated or desperate, martyrdom provides the ultimate escape from life's dilemmas (6).

Various grievances and social stressors can contribute to the formation of terrorist groups. Social instability provides fertile ground for terrorist activity. For instance, lack of professional opportunities can produce a sense of rage, powerlessness, and resentment among the populace. These frustrated and angry individuals may join terrorist squads, which provide them a range of emotional, social, and economic benefits. Individuals who feel uncertainty about their future may find that terrorist groups may satisfy their needs for justice and afford them an opportunity to bolster their self-esteem and even give them a sense of identity.

In fact, the move from being a disaffected individual to a violent extremist is usually facilitated by some catalyst event. Research findings reveal that most suicide bombers have had at least one of their loved ones killed or severely harmed at the hands of their enemies.

Many of them join terrorist groups in a vengeful state of mind with the intent to take part in aggressive acts. They are rarely coerced into it (Silke 183).

Some other scholars, such as Michael Stevens, argue that globalisation has greatly contributed to the creation of socio-cultural and psychosocial conditions from which terrorism is more likely to emerge (36). The West has exported its economic, political, and cultural systems with little regard as to how they might be received. Indeed, while globalisation has generated wealth, it has also contributed to the uprooting of traditional values and customs. It has increased economic inequality, and posed threats to languages and communities alike. It has provided support for oppressive regimes.

But globalisation has also given rise to prejudice-profiling, in particular Muslims and Arabs. Throughout recent history, the word “Arab” or “Muslim” has indeed been rendered synonymous with terrorism in the Westerners’ views. As a result, the Muslims have been projected as villains, religious fanatics and mostly as terrorists. For the West, Arab Muslims are still regarded as camel-riding, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization (Said 108).

Many Western scholars have indeed vilified and demonised the Muslims. Samuel P. Huntington, for instance, in his book *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), considered terrorism to be the weapon of the weak, that is, of those who do not possess conventional military power. Since World War II, nuclear weapons have also been the weapon by which the weak compensate for conventional inferiority. Samuel P. Huntington stated that Muslim states are reportedly interested in developing nuclear weapons including Iraq (178-188). In fact, Huntington built his theories on abstractions and myths rather than concrete evidences. In Edward Said’s view, his theories could be regarded as nothing more than a gimmick. Noam Chomsky also disagreed with this opaque judgment, “We find that, like most weapons, terror is primarily a weapon of the powerful” (189). Richard Nixon’s famous conversation with Henry Kissinger is one such example: “I’d rather use the nuclear bomb...The nuclear bomb, does that bother you? I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christ sake” (Carroll 351). As a matter of fact, terror is not the weapon of the colonised and the oppressed only, even the Americans’ violent acts in Iraq are also terrorist acts. And yet bombing defenceless civilians with

F-16s and helicopter gunships has the same structure and effect as more conventional nationalist terror (Said ““Islam and the West””).

Notwithstanding the previous spectrums, American president George W. Bush has backed into the hypothesis by saying that Arab terrorists hate them because they are free and that the war on terror is a fight between civilisations (Transcript of President Bush's address). Bush's aphorism is false and even dangerous. Before the American invasion, the Iraqis had been living in freedom, serenity and peace. Bush fuelled hatred and made it clear that his war is not against terror but against Islam. Further, he astonishingly claimed that God talked to him saying: “*George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq*” (MacAskill “George Bush”). In view of what has been said above, it seems that Bush, Huntington along with Western policy did create the “clash of civilisations.” They divided the Muslim world and Muslims into two camps: “bad Muslims” and “good Muslims,” but after the attacks of 9/11, all Muslims became ‘terrorists,’ in their views.

The proposed definitions regarding terrorist agents, targets, goals, and the harms inflicted by terrorists have provided the basis for an analysis of the literary text. Therefore, we shall see how Khadra attempts to address the cycle of terrorism, how the terrorised becomes a terrorist, and actively participates in the cycle. What kind of person can kill innocent men, women, and children and is prepared to sacrifice his own life in the process of killing and maiming others? How can such a person be considered in the same terms as the rest of humanity (Silke 179). In short, the selected novel considers the impact of the wider political on the personal.

A New Genre: The Terrorist Novel

After the 9/11, there emerged a new genre, the “terrorist novel,” a narrative which explores the motives and ideas behind the sociopolitical and psychic act of terrorism. This is the type of terrorist narrative that critic Margaret Scanlan, for example, investigated in her study *Plotting Terror* (2001) as well as Khadra’s *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008), which together with *The Attack* (2006) and *The Swallows of Kabul* (2005) forms a trilogy.

In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, Yasmina Khadra takes us further into the realm of human destructiveness. It is indeed a chilling tale that describes the descent of a young Iraqi student into the abyss of horror and terror. Khadra brings the reader inside the mind of an unnamed

terrorist-to-be, an Iraqi Bedouin, radicalised by witnessing the death of civilians and the humiliation of the population by the American forces in the Second Gulf War. Forced to leave the University of Baghdad after U.S. bombing closed it, the protagonist, a young man from a tiny desert Iraqi village, gets back home, and there three major events transform him. First, he witnesses the shooting of the local blacksmith's mentally disabled son by the American soldiers at a checkpoint. Shortly thereafter, a missile destroys a wedding party on the outskirts of the village, but when GIs break into his family's home and humiliate his father in full view of the terrified family, in a gross violation of Bedouin mores. This last event has been more than the Bedouin could bear. In describing the American razzia, Khadra explains in great details the sense of honour in the Bedouin culture, something that a Western person cannot understand. Therefore, for the unnamed narrator, to see his father naked was an utter disaster. In the Arab world, dignity is the central nerve. Khadra points here to the clash between Western and Eastern cultures:

A Westerner can't understand, can't suspect the dimensions of the disaster. For me, to see my father's sex was to reduce my entire existence, my values and my scruples, my pride and my singularity, to a coarse, pornographic flash. The gates of hell would have seemed less catastrophic! I was finished (102).

The narrator thus left for Baghdad and resolved to strike back by exacting a bloody revenge for his family's dishonour. The young man joins the extremists who use him for their Machiavellian plans. He eventually accepts to accomplish a mission more dreadful than the 9/11 by using a biological weapon and the method's plausibility sends a shiver down the spine of most readers.

Therefore, the writer acts as an intermediary to explain the Arab mentality and culture to the West. His strategy of evoking western readers aims to make them understand the real motives behind the narrator's turning from a pacifist young man into a fundamentalist. This strategy teaches readers and makes it clear that extremism is not just about dogmatic issues but it could be generated by aggression and humiliation.

Actually, the invasion created a wide-ranging landscape of antagonistic young people ever ready to engage in violent acts often mobilised by religious appeal, among the most radical of them, a sense of martyrdom justifying the use of any means even carrying out suicidal missions like the protagonist in *The Sirens of Baghdad*.

The weapon in question is a virus. My mission consists in carrying a virus... A virus. My weapon, my bomb, my kamikaze airplane... (263). Your mission then will consist in riding the subway and going to train stations, stadiums, and supermarkets, with the goal of contaminating the maximum number of people. Particularly in train stations, so the epidemic will spread to the other regions of the kingdom... This is an unstoppable mutating virus. A great revolution. It is our ultimate weapon (288).

Khadra's novel is indeed a terrorist fiction par excellence, because it portrays the lives, motives and causes of terrorism by showing the human side of terrorists. It reveals how young men are transformed into religious fanatics. The story can be seen as a terrorist biography.

The Logic of Suicide Bombing

We are accused of terrorism
If we defend our land
And the honor of its dust
If we revolted against the rape of people
Our rape
If we defended the last palm trees in our desert
...
I am with Irhab [terrorism]
as long this new world
hates the smell of Arabs.

Nizar Qabbani, quoted in Tariq Ali, Bush in Babylon: The Recolonisation of Iraq (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 7-13.

Since 2003, the shape and size of jihadi terrorism has changed. New questions have risen following the attacks and thwarted plots in Europe. For instance, investigations about the Madrid, Amsterdam and

London attacks show no relation with Al-Qaeda or any other global Salafi network. The same holds for the jihadi terrorists in *The Sirens*.

With regard to the causes of suicide terrorism, it is worth noting that Pr. Robert Pape's extensive research from 1980 to 2004 proves that Islam is not to blame, the root of the problem is foreign military occupations. Pape concludes that Islamic fundamentalism is not as closely associated with suicide terrorism as is widely believed, and it does not provide the primary motivation for the majority of suicide bombers, many of whom have secular identities and aspirations. The leading agent of suicide terrorism is the Tamil Tigers, which is not an Islamic group but a particularly secular Marxist group, which has committed more suicide terrorist attacks than either Hamas or Islamic Jihad in Palestine (27). However, some liberation movements like Hamas add a spiritual dimension to their struggle. They regard suicide missions against the colonizer as an act of martyrdom and heroism, a supreme worship act, worthy of both earthly and heavenly rewards.

Famous scholars such as Jean Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon have argued in favour of such violent acts of resistance. For them, violence is legitimate and necessary to achieve independence. “*We find our humanity on this side of death and despair... The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity*” (Preface 24).

By deconstructing the concept of terrorism in *The Sirens of Baghdad*, we may also agree with Jacques Derrida that war imposes the faith in the myth of cathartic violence, the idea that “our violence” is legitimate, salvational and purposeful. Khadra indeed justifies violent resistance in his novels by calling the colonised people ‘the wretched of the earth,’ (112) and the oppressed (268). *The Sirens of Baghdad* demonstrates how suicide bombing provides the ultimate escape from life’s dilemmas, especially for individuals who, like the protagonist feel deeply alienated, confused, humiliated and desperate. By trying to find reasons for his protagonist’s evil actions, Khadra attempts to reverse the image of the suicide bomber as a monster, an Islamist or a mad fundamentalist. For Khadra, Islam has nothing to do with violence. Poverty, political corruption, colonialism and despair instead are the main triggers for terrorism. “*And everyone fights with the methods they have...Otherwise, the young people would not blow themselves up in a restaurant. They’d use drones, tanks or airplanes*” (Bertelsen 6), he adds. Furthermore, Khadra’s terrorists are not readers of Sayyid Qutb

or even of the Koran, nor do they have visions of reestablishing the Caliphate. For instance, the female Palestinian character in Khadra's *The Attack* (2006), named Sihem, a Christian Westernised wealthy wife, committed suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. Sihem was not urged by Islamist radicalism because she was Christian, rather she was frustrated and desperate because of the fragmented identity and grinding oppression of the Palestinians. She could not even have children under Israeli persecution as she states "*No child is completely safe if it has no country*" (69). Khadra again vividly explains to us, through one of his characters, the Palestinian priest, the different types of Muslims who use violence to achieve their ends, distinguishing between radical Islamism and resistance. This explanation reduces the ideological and cultural confusion concerning terror-wreaking.

An Islamist is a political activist. He has but one ambition: to establish a theocratic state in his country and take full advantage of its sovereignty and its independence. A fundamentalist is an extreme jihadi. He believes neither in the sovereignty of Muslim states nor in their autonomy. In his view, these are vassal states that will be called upon to dissolve themselves and form the one, sole Caliphate. The fundamentalist dreams of a single, indivisible umma, the great Muslim community that will extend from Indonesia to Morocco, and which, if it cannot convert the West to Islam, will subjugate or destroy it. We're not Islamists... and we're not fundamentalists, either. We are only the children of a ravaged, despised people, fighting with whatever means we can to recover our homeland and our dignity. Nothing more, nothing less (158).

Indeed, revolutionists and freedom fighters are not terrorists. Their violent actions are a result of their blind love for their countries as Joseba has it: "*At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that a true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a true revolutionary lacking in this quality*" (Joseba 63). These are the often quoted words from Che Guevara. And it is in this sense that "the terrorist" in *The Sirens of Baghdad* should be understood. He

was forced to enter the realms of violence because of his violated honour, beloved home and country.

In the following passage, Khadra shows how the protagonist finds salvation through violence.

I heard the foul beast roar deep inside me, and it was clear that sooner or later, whatever happened, I was condemned to wash away this insult in blood, until the rivers and the oceans turned as red as the cut on Bahia's neck, as my mother's eyes, as the fire in my guts, which was already preparing me for the hell I knew was waiting (102).

In the last chapter of *The Sirens of Baghdad*, at Beirut airport where the protagonist was going to travel in order to carry his suicidal mission, Khadra depicts him as a hero instead of an evil terrorist. The writer could not totally dehumanize him. Indeed, violence and war may damage this sensitive Iraqi young man and temporarily distort his perception of right and wrong. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, the paralysis of conscience that causes a suicide assassin – protagonist – to unleash random acts of violence also becomes the paralysis of inaction. The writer injects a grain of hope as the narrator observes the happiness of a woman and a couple of young Europeans at the airport. The narrator's desire for life and peace prevails over death and the will to avenge. The protagonist heroically sacrifices himself breaking the cycle of hatred and violence. The good side in him wins over his hatred and rage (306). The voice of wisdom murmurs: “*If you want to avenge an offense, don't commit one. If you think your honor must be saved, don't dishonor your people. Don't give way to madness*” (183). In fact, the terrorist novel like *The Sirens of Baghdad* is different from other genres; it has a specific strategy, since we do not find absolute answers in it. The characters waver and decide, the authors present their cases and fates, and thus we may judge their validity. What we want most from the terrorist novel is to know and experience why someone chooses terror. We want to be inside the mind of the terrorist (Blessington 117). Khadra used this strategy perfectly, as he preferred to adopt the perspective of a naïve protagonist who is suddenly forced to comprehend war and fused into it, turning into a reluctant fundamentalist. Thus, the use of an ignorant hero has a didactic function, it makes readers figure out the causes that led the

protagonist to extremism through explanation step by step while the plot is developing.

The Western reader is provoked in the novel when the protagonist stated that Westerners understand nothing as he attempted to explain the sense of honor and the mentality of the Bedouin after the night raid on his home. This raid was the turning point for the protagonist that pushed him into the realm of violence and vengeance. The narrator's honor was violated when a US soldier pushes his father over and he sees his father naked. For the narrator, seeing beneath his father's nightshirt is a shame that should be wash away with blood if necessary, it compromised everything.

Khadra, however, questions the use of excessive violence by the resistance and its moral dimension. Can we consider civilians death as an inevitable price of war? Indeed, killing civilians undermines the image of resistance and recalls that of the colonizer. As an ex-Iraqi soldier –the protagonist's cousin– adds: "*The actions of the fedayeen are lowering us in the eyes of the world. We're Iraqis, cousin. We have eleven thousand years of history behind us. We're the ones who taught men to dream*" (161). Besides, one of the minor characters criticised harshly the protagonist fanatic fellows for the brutality of their unethical war that caused civilians death more than soldiers, "*You consider yourselves Fedayeen...But you're nothing but murderers. Vandals. Child-killers...*" (231). Indeed, due to extremists, the whole world regards resistance in the Arab world as nothing more than a cult of nihilism.

All in all, Muslim scholars like Tariq Ramadan and many others issued a fatwa denouncing terrorist acts committed in the name of Islam (Nik Gowing "Fatwa Denouncing Terrorism"). In fact, suicide bombing and killing civilians have nothing to do with Islam teachings. There were no situations under which acts of vengeance, such as attacks on market places or commuter trains, could ever be considered a justifiable act of war, as Jihad in the name of God (Casciani "Terrorism Fatwa"). The Koran is clear enough on this point: "*And do not kill yourselves (nor kill one another). Surely, Allah is Most Merciful to you*" (Chapter 4, verse 29). In another Koranic verse, "*And spend in the cause of Allah (i.e. Jihad of all kinds, etc.) and do not throw yourselves into destruction*" (Chapter 2, verse 195). There is also a widely accepted

speech of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that warns Muslims against killing:

Whoever purposely throws himself from a mountain and kills himself, will be in the (Hell) Fire falling down into it and abiding therein perpetually forever; and whoever drinks poison and kills himself with it, he will be carrying his poison in his hand and drinking it in the (Hell) Fire wherein he will abide eternally forever; and whoever kills himself with an iron weapon, will be carrying that weapon in his hand and stabbing his `Abdomen with it in the (Hell) Fire wherein he will abide eternally forever (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 71, Hadith 670).

Islam explicitly forbids suicide that is used for Jihad, and yet again the claim that terror is a legitimate or excusable response to oppression is, according to Tahir Ul-Qadri –an Islamist scholar–, an “awful syllogism” because “*evil cannot become good under any circumstances*” (Caryl “Sheikh to Terrorists”). Suicide attack is outlawed if it means killing an innocent. Ul-Qadri went further declaring that the terrorists must realise that whatever they have been taught is absolutely wrong and that they will end up in hell. In his view, terrorism is a manifestation of disbelief, not just a profound sin but a veritable denial of Islam. On the other hand, Ul-Qadri denounced occupation and acts of aggression against Islam, but insisted that they must be resisted peaceably whenever possible and strictly according to the laws of war (*Ibid.*). While suicide is associated with hopelessness and depression, terrorist leaders regard such attacks not as acts of suicide, but rather as acts of martyrdom.

Despite the essential bleakness of the novel’s theme, Khadra manages to inject a note of hope toward the end, without betraying his powerful message of how the occupation of Iraq has brutalised the Iraqis.

Khadra presented the root causes of Iraqi antagonism and hatred toward the coalition forces in his novel. Iraqis hate Western regimes not Western people because of the occupation. There is nothing such as the myth of civilizations’ clash, but policies’ clash.

I see fugitives at the mercy of a rocket or a missile,
and, all around, I see faithless, lawless brutes

trampling on us in our own country... Iraq is occupied... GIs are profaning our mosques, manhandling our holy men, and bottling up our prayers like flies. How much more provocation does He need, your God, before He loses His temper? (78).

In this way, the West is always defaming national resistance by accusing Muslims of terrorism, but authors like Khadra tried to do the opposite and reveal the truth. Khadra has attempted to turn the label of terrorism against those who use it to defame national struggle.

For Khadra's Iraqi characters, terrorism is not only a phenomenon practiced by some ethnic or religious groups such as those who blow themselves up, killing others, it is also those who fly an F16 and drop phosphorous bombs and other kinds of lethal weapons on civilians.

In his novels, Yasmina Khadra has tried to revise history and condemned such orientalist axiom of stereotyping that fill the press and the popular mind. The author's main objective has been to make the West have an insider's perspective into the real motives that drive young men to embrace terrorism. In a word, the writer has made it clear that imperial violence is the cause of the world's dysfunction and that terrorism is the weapon of the strong.

In spite of that, portraying terrorists as humans does not suggest legitimising it. Because of the demonization of Arabs and Muslims, mainly due to the lack of knowledge of transcontinental cultures, Khadra's novels attempt to build and delineate bonds of sympathy across the borders of nationally imagined communities (McManus, 82). Indeed, Khadra addresses the ideological cultural clash between Western and Eastern views concerning terror as he makes his Western readers get inside the Arab-Muslim culture. As stated in the novel, Iraqis are not violent savage terrorists; they are poets, writers and have lust for life and freedom whereas, American soldiers have been described many times as faithless "brutes." As Khadra says:

Until the day when our privacy was violated, our taboos broken, our dignity dragged through mud and gore...until the day when brutes festooned with grenades and handcuffs burst into the gardens of Babylon, come to teach poets how to be free men (12).

In short, extremism in Iraq and the Middle East in general has nothing to do with Islam. It is a cult of nihilism, as pointed earlier. Those who embraced extremism had been brutalised during Saddam's regime. They endured not only Saddam's cruelty but invasion and occupation as well. Given their manifold sufferings, they could no longer believe in justice and instead resorted to violence. One might say that the extremists are the spiritual children of Western brutality and crimes in Iraq; children of religious ignorance and strife, a cult as merciless as it is morbid. Besides, terrorism is not Islamic. Religions, in general, do not promote violence but paradoxically, religion breaks through frontiers and in the same process throws up new frontiers.

In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, Khadra thus makes it clear that to understand terrorism, one has to dig deep into the roots; the political institutions, their policies and stratifications, societal composition together with the general economic, social, psychological and emotional well-being of every individual in the population. Exploring these branches will help one to see why crime rates are far from declining in the contemporary world.

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