

## **The South African Muslim Communities Response to September 11<sup>th</sup>**

Abdulkader Tayob

An analysis of the reaction of Muslim communities in Southern Africa to the events of September 11 and its aftermath should begin with some reflection on the notion of Muslim communities themselves. The idea of a Muslim community as a clearly identified social group is not in principle a social fiction, but it is an extremely complex construction. The present focus on Muslim communities worldwide tends to gloss over history, class, linguistic and ethnicity, and over-emphasize their religious dimension. The non-religious dimensions, and the broader social and political contexts in which Muslims live, equally affect the way Muslims respond and react. In the present climate, these complex, multi-faceted responses are characterized as peculiarly Islamic, and a public image of *the* Muslim community is constructed. The Muslim community is of course part of this construction, as Muslims themselves participate in the public discussion and debate. Some Muslims emerge more strongly than others to capitalize on this construction, while others tend to partially or wholly contest it. As the idea of the Muslim community as an identifiable group gains currency on the international terrain, Muslims themselves seem to accept this designation. But one should not assume that the construction is unproblematic.

This construction of Muslim communities, consisting of the complex reactions of individuals deemed Muslim, is increasingly put up for discussion. While such discussions are important, they should not avoid a critical awareness that what is being spoken about is not as easily identifiable as might appear at first sight. I want to show, with respect to the small Muslim population of South Africa, the complexity of this notion and the provisional character of our subject matter. At the same time, I want to go beyond the deconstruction, and make some remarks about the Muslim communities and their reaction to the West since September 11.

As a religious minority in Southern Africa, the Muslim community cannot be completely dissociated from its racial-ethnic identity, its class formation, and its

particular history. Muslims in the various racial categories of apartheid South Africa experience Islam in very different ways. African Muslims who embraced Islam in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have a different conception of Islam from Indian communities that came to South Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and established mosques and schools. Similarly, Indian working class Muslims celebrate Sufi death anniversaries that most middle class traders find abhorrent and unIslamic. Cape Muslims who originate even earlier – in the slave history of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – have inscribed an even different history. Indian, Coloured and African experiences in the turbulent history of South Africa over the past 300 years affects Muslim reactions and responses. In the midst of the complexity and diversity, it is only possible to speak of South African Muslim communities (Davids 1980; Moosa 1993; Tayob 1999). They are communities in the plural, and defined within the national boundaries of South Africa. The responses of Muslim communities to the events of September 11 can be elucidated if we keep in mind the provisional, constructed nature of the social category of Muslim communities.

In order to understand the particular response of Muslims to events of September 11, I think it best to focus on those who have participated in the social and political discourse of Islam since the 1970s. It is possible to speak of a national discourse of Islam among religious leaders, teachers, media workers, schools, student organizations, welfare and social organizations and their staff, and some interest groups like medical doctors. This national discourse is not shared by all the diverse sectors of the Muslim community, and is itself a highly contested terrain of public discourse. It is a fragmented discourse that displays some identifiable responses. Esack divided Muslim responses to apartheid in terms of their reliance on international trends, while I focussed on the social and intellectual dilemmas of Muslim youth in the 1970s and 1980s. Recently, Vahed has pointed out the much neglected class dimension of Muslim rituals among particularly Indians (Tayob 1995; Esack 1988; Vahed 2001). It must be clear that we are not talking about all Muslims in the country. Most Muslims would have an opinion about September 11, but do not necessarily feel it important or necessary to respond as Muslims to these events. Occasionally, in the present context, they might even be caught up in a demonstration or a mosque gathering, but it would be risky to generalize beyond specific events.

Within this broad spectrum, it is possible to speak of an identifiable range of Muslim responses. The September 11 attacks immediately provoked a near-unanimous round of condemnations of those who dared to attack civilians. The Muslim Judicial Council, a representative body of religious leaders in the Western Cape, is the most outspoken of *ulama* organizations. It issued unequivocal statements condemning the attacks, and was supported by a number of student and social organizations. Even an arson attack on the offices of the organization's headquarters ten days after the September 11 attacks did not divert it from its focus. According to a weekly newspaper, *The Mail and Guardian*, the "MJC secretary general Sheikh Achmat Sedick said the organisation would maintain its stance of not reacting to the abuse "to avoid the confrontation some appear to be wanting"" (Merten 2001). Sedick's quoted statement provides a sense that it did not approve of the confrontation, but also revealed the awareness of unnamed forces that may want to capitalize on the situation.

However, the American decision to attack Afghanistan and Bush's rhetoric of a united *crusade* against terrorism changed attitudes among Muslims. When retaliatory attacks began on October 7, the response of the MJC changed. A number of organizations openly called for Muslims to prepare for a *jihad* against America. The MJC itself was very cautious, but it could not stop the popular sentiment against the United States decision to attack Afghanistan without presenting the evidence it had in any international forum. But again, the Muslim Judicial Council took the lead in organizing an anti-war rally with Christian groups in Cape Town, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the largest umbrella body of trade unions in the country on October 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> The Christians and trade unions were represented mainly by their officials and the composite character of the march was lost on observers. However, it was clear that the MJC leadership was forging a different kind of reaction to the events of both September 11, and October 7, 2001.

This ambivalence towards the conflict in Afghanistan was confirmed in interviews I conducted with individuals in South Africa over December 2001, and January 2002. The Vice President of the organization, Mawlana Igsaan Hendricks, shared his

misgivings after the call for *jihad* raised by his colleagues: “Many of us had our reservations (while) others did not hesitate to add their voices to this whole concern for this *jihad* issue.” Speaking hypothetically, but revealingly, he intimated to the concerns and questions his colleagues had about the call for *jihad* from someone like Usamah bin Laden: “whether we all accept as *ulama* that an individual person, let's now take Usamah bin Laden as an example, whether we believe that he does have the authority as an individual to call for jihad?” Hendicks caution may easily be compared with Muslims who have openly condemned Bin Laden. But his caution is understandable in the light of the uncertainty if Bin Laden and his group really existed, and if they attacked the WTC and the Pentagon. The mood in the Muslim community in Cape Town had been influenced by the American and allied attacks on Afghanistan. Any discussion of September 11, 2001 could not be disengaged from the Western reaction against Afghanistan in particular, and Muslims in general.

The MJC in general, and Hendrick's position in particular, becomes much clearer if we survey some of the other Muslim approaches to the events. A number of vociferous groups and individuals received a lot of coverage in the media for expressing strong anti-American views. When it became apparent that America suspected Usamah bin Laden, all eyes turned to the Muslim community. The Islamic Unity Convention, an umbrella organization of Muslim organizations led by leading activist Achmat Cassiem quickly focussed on the foreign policy of the United States. Short of calling the attack a just reprisal, this organization did not hesitate to cite numerous conspiracies that may have caused the attack. Using the radio station at its disposal, the Islamic Unity Convention did not deliberate on the possible Muslim connection to the attack. Similarly, a media watchdog group, The Media Review Network, became a regular contributor to the Muslim media in particular, and the public in general. Arbitrary attacks on Muslims in the West were cited as part of a wide-ranging attack on Muslims. Whilst condemning the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon, it focussed mainly on the roots of the conflict in the adventurous foreign policy of the United States. It reprinted at least two booklets on the event, the first consisting of a series of newspaper articles written by Canadian Muslim journalist Zafar Bangash and another by Naom Chomsky. Both, from slightly different perspectives, dwelled on the inconsistencies and destabilizing nature of American

foreign policy. And both focused on the economic interests of American foreign policy that fuelled the present conflict. The attacks on Afghanistan were seen as a smokescreen for pursuing clandestine interests. In addition to the Media Review Network, other organizations and religious leaders were equally critical of American policy in the Middle East. A satellite radio station *Channel Islam* expressed a prevailing tendency towards America during the bombing of Afghanistan: “We wouldn’t take up an offence against you if you are anti-Taliban; but be rest assured we would challenge you if you are pro-American. That is definite.”

This statement clearly presents the view of those who could not support the attackers of the WTC and the Pentagon, but were equally sure about their views of America on the world stage. Others were even more anti-American. Around October 7, a number of religious and community leaders called on Muslims to join the Taliban. Like thousands of Pakistanis who massed along the border, some Muslims in South Africa announced a *jihad* to protect Afghanistan. The South African media lost no chance in presenting the *jihad* as counter-part to the mobilization and preparation of the American and European forces for Afghanistan. Abdurrahman Khan, self-styled leader of Muslims Against Illegitimate Leaders, claimed that Muslims would support the Jihad of the Taliban and Usamah bin Laden. Khan’s pronouncements on *jihad* match the expectations of the media of Muslims on the warpath. In this context, again, the Muslim Judicial Council did not lose an opportunity to praise President Mbeki for refusing to support America militarily. In the *Cape Argus* report on the gathering of recruits, the Muslim Judicial Council praised the President: “Muslim leaders in the Western Cape also lauded President Thabo Mbeki for not offering military assistance to the United States in the wake of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre last week.”<sup>2</sup>

There exists yet another trend in South Africa that supported the Taliban’s interpretation. Unlike the Muslim Unity Convention and the Media Review Network, religious leaders trained in Indian seminaries were more sympathetic to the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Before the attack of September 11<sup>th</sup>, they regularly published articles that praised the Taliban against its Western and Muslim critics in

their regular newspapers, *Jamiat*, published in print and online by the Jamiat Ulama Kwazulu-Natal, and *ar-Rashied*, from the Johannesburg based Jamiat Ulama Gauteng. The following extract comes from an article in *Jamiat* that rebuts the critics with regard to the Taliban's attitude towards women:

The treatment of women in Afghanistan is a subject that the Western Media and Feminists have concentrated their ideological warfare efforts on. They have based their 'reports' and analyses on a number of interviews with Communist women ...<sup>3</sup>

The article goes on to report the increasing number of schools made available for women by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in comparison with the communist and other Mujahidin governments. It also supports the enforced wearing of the veil for the "honor, dignity, and personal safety of the women in Afghanistan." In yet another article, the same newspaper published another article warning of the impending designs of the US and the United Nations on the freedom and resources of Afghanistan. Whilst the first one tried to reason that the reports published in the press do not reflect the true situation in the country, this one depicts the Taliban regime as the only true Islamic government in the world:

The supplication (*Dua*) of the Ummah for Afghanistan should be that Allah Ta'ala guides the Taalibaan and imbue them with the Noor of true wisdom so that they do not become entangled in the meshes of the vast western plot in the making. With its primitive army of Mujahideen and with its 'poverty' and lack of sophisticated weaponry and lack of technology, Afghanistan can hold its ground against the onslaught of the kuffaar [unbelievers]. But the day when western technology under the aegis of the US and UN will be introduced, Afghanistan's independence, freedom, power and wealth will disappear. May Allah Ta'ala [the most high] protect them and keep the spirit of Jihad burning fiercely in their hearts. It is imperative that the Taalibaan be always alert to the conspiracies which the West is perpetually engineering.<sup>4</sup>

This article appeared well before the September 11 attack. It reflects the mood of the writer in the context of international criticism of Afghanistan. On the other hand, when the US attacks against Afghanistan had taken their toll, the response then took on two features. On the one hand, Muslims are exhorted to be patient and wait for a better day:

So, while the kuffâr [unbelievers] and the mushrik [polytheist] plan and conspire against the Muslim, we should take heed of what ALLÂH says: “So lose not heart, nor fall into despair; for you must gain mastery if you are true in Faith” (Qur’ân 3:139) and again; “Follow Allâh and the Rasûl [Messenger] and be vigilant” (Qur’ân 5:92) Allâh Ta’âla exhorts the Muslim to be vigilant and cautious.

The editorial advises Muslims to develop stronger faith so that they can become like the true victors of the first epic battle of Badr fought by the Prophet Muhammad and his enemies. Quoting the famous Indian Poet Muhammad Iqbal, they ask the Muslims to examine their spiritual preparation: “Create the atmosphere of Badr, for your help the angels could descend from the heavens, file after file, even now!”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the newspaper also regularly carried articles that carried any attacks on the American forces, and also used Mosque notice boards to record any such success attacks.<sup>6</sup> The religious groups supporting the Taliban, then, tried to grasp any hope that the forces of truth and faith were making against the West.

In the midst of these strong feelings on the war, the position of the Muslim Judicial Council calls for some reflection. I think that the MJC’s response is a reflection of a particular experience of South African democracy. The first democratic elections in 1994 witnessed a turning point for Muslims in the country. A number of attempts were made to launch political parties in the name of Islam. The parties were split on a regional basis, and managed to split the already small number of votes among Muslims. But the biggest challenge to the democracy came from two other approaches. In the first case, Muslims asked that the new constitution to make provision for Muslim Personal Law. This was granted during the writing of the constitution, and became an issue of intense debate in the country. In South Africa,

however, in the context of a free press and the free expression of religion, the debates within the Muslim community were more intense than those between the Muslims and the secular democratic state. The debate among Muslims concerned the extent to which the Bill of Rights should determine the particular interpretation of Muslim Personal Law. The state judicial system acted as a guiding institution to preserve the Bill of Rights, but also to ensure that the perceived rights of a religious community were maintained. In my view, this balancing of the two key imperatives have often been lost in many debates on Muslims elsewhere. Sometimes the humanitarian rights are posed against the rights of a community, and sometimes the community's rights are elevated above the individual human rights. The challenge in a democracy that guarantees both the rights of individuals and freedom of associations, rest on a balance between the two. Presently, a bill recognizing Muslim marriages stands ready to be passed as legislation that, in my view, has found the balance.

The second challenge to democracy came to the fore in 1996 when a vigilante group, People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD), began a campaign of active combat against drug lords and gangsters. It received huge support, particularly from Muslims who responded to the Islamic slogans and rhetoric of its leading figures. PAGAD was soon identified in the press and academic debate as a militant Islamic movement bent on the destruction of the democratic ethos. The organization itself was challenged by other Muslims on its ulterior motives, and it itself tried to remain as ambiguous as possible. Sometimes it appeared to be a civic society that expressed the rage of township residents frustrated by the inability and sometimes complicity of police structures in dealing with crime. At other times, it presented itself as the true and authentic voice of Islam against a fledgling democracy. The response of the state was not uniform. Some security operatives saw in PAGAD the long arm of global Islamic militancy. In their mind, PAGAD was the result of an insurgency orchestrated by HAMAS, Hezbollah, Iran, and Ghaddafi. Overwhelming security legislation was proposed to deal with this new threat. Others, however, saw PAGAD as a local phenomenon produced by the frustrations and problems of local problems. Eventually, the strategy of the state seemed to be one that targeted individuals involved in violent acts while leaving the organization intact. Freedom of association and freedom of speech continued to be enjoyed by PAGAD as an organization, but

individuals involved in criminal activities were brought to trial. As the arrests came through, and both convictions and acquittals were well publicized, PAGAD and its violent tactics and rhetoric lost support.

Both the *Shari'ah* debates and street mobilizations posed some critical opportunities for Muslims to think carefully about South Africa's democracy. In the ongoing resolution of both challenges lies the seed of the MJC's response to September 11. Whilst it could not ignore the opportunism of American foreign policy, many Muslims were also wary of how militant Islamic voices were hijacking the name of Islam for their political goals. Whilst concerned about the civilians of America and Afghanistan, they had some experience of the fragility of their own peace in the midst of an Islamic militant uprising. In contrast with their colleagues in the Jamiats, they were more liberal towards the participation of women in society and could not share the well-publicized attitudes of the Taliban. Clearly, the limited example of South Africa indicates that we need more democracy, and more rights, not less, to respond to Islamist demands on *Shar'iah* and the need to address the problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

Any discussion of Muslim communities' reaction to September 11 should begin with a careful consideration of the boundaries and limits of such communities. The nature of these reactions pertains largely to identifiable groups in a particular social and political space, with a unique history, and that have articulated their social and political concerns. Taking South Africa as an example, I have argued that a national discourse among Muslim since the 1970s is the highly distinct sphere of the present debate. Within this discourse, there are varied responses to the present polarization of relations between Islam and the West, two highly generalized terms.

The response of the Muslim Judicial Council provides a strong argument that the responses are highly complex. Since the attacks of September 11, there has been an attempt to separate radical Muslims from moderate Muslims. This debate has been on the agenda of the West, and on the world stage, for the past one hundred years. Certainly, there exist different interpretations of Islam that fit these particular

categories. But the experience of Islamic responses suggests that moderate interpretations by themselves do not provide one or the other attractions. The example of South Africa suggests that the risks of democracy should be applied to the demands of Muslims. The freedom of expression and association that go along with this will provide a more long-lasting solution to religious extremism. In the case of South Africa, anti-American responses are not by themselves a problem. They are often impolite, but the fruits of democracy promise greater reward in the long run.

These responses are direct responses to developments in the international scene. Almost all responses, from the Media Review Network to the *Jamiats*, are responses to the real and perceived actions of America, the United Nations and the Soviet Union. Demonstrations focus on the economic designs of the Americans or the Soviets. The Muslims as producers of history are almost absent. These Muslim groups find it convenient to blame someone for their failures and their woes. The pervasive nature of American foreign policy and their allies can easily be blamed. When all fails, the brilliant record of the past can provide a soothing balm for one's wounds. And yet, in the context of South Africa, one begins to see the elements of subjectivity. I have tried show in this article that the tentative and unique position by the Muslim Judicial Council suggests a change. Members in the Muslim Judicial Council seem aware of their own history since the first democratic elections, and seem prepared to make the tentative moves towards a less reactive and more positive approach to problems in the world. This in itself does not absolve the United State's adventures in the world, but begins the process of being able to look both at the other and oneself in an open and critical light.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Muslims and Christians unite against war.” *Independent Online*, October 11, 2001, accessed October 15, 2002, [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&art\\_id=qw1002808981388B222](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=qw1002808981388B222).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, “SA Muslims in Afghanistan `for aid, not war,” *The Star*, December 3, 2001, accessed October 15, 2002, [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&art\\_id=ct20011203203431753A1252199](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=ct20011203203431753A1252199); “PAGAD under spotlight after Gaddafi links,” *Cape Argus*, October 10, 2001, accessed October 15, 2002, [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&art\\_id=ct20011010134128200N430537](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=ct20011010134128200N430537); “SA groups recruiting for ‘Afghani’ brothers,” *Cape Argus*, September 21, 2001, accessed October 15, 2002, [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&art\\_id=ct20010921091007302L24257](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=ct20010921091007302L24257).

<sup>3</sup> “Taliban and Women”, *Jamiat*, [http://www.jamiat.org.za/women/taliban\\_women.html](http://www.jamiat.org.za/women/taliban_women.html).

<sup>4</sup> “Afghanistan: the wealthiest country” reprinted from *The Majlis Vol 14. No 5, Jamiat*, <http://www.jamiat.org.za/isinfo/afghanistan.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ar-Rasheed, organ of the Jamiat Ulama (Gauteng), <http://www.islamsa.org.za/arrasheed/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Jamiat*, 16 January 2002, <http://www.jamiat.org.za/afghan/news1601.htm>; 17 September 2002, <http://www.jamiat.org.za/news/spring/sept19d.html>