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Views: Arab Atheists and their Quest for Acceptance amid Religious Intolerance

Khaled Diab

An “atheism tsunami” is reportedly engulfing and inundating Arab countries. This has caused outrage and fear in the religious establishment and large segments of the mainstream media. Saudi Arabia, where “apostasy” was already punishable by death, has gone so far as to invoke the language of the War on Terror, classifying atheism as a form of terrorism. Al-Azhar, one of the world’s leading seats of Islamic learning, has declared ideological war on atheism, launching initiatives to combat the spread of irreligiosity.

The reasons for this moral panic are multiple. Both the religious establishment and some states rest their claim to legitimacy, at least partly, on religious grounds and so citizens abandoning their faith undermines their authority and constitutes a form of *de facto* anti-authoritarianism and rebellion, even when the majority of atheists are not politically active and most keep their beliefs private or even secret.

In addition, the mainstream self-image of numerous countries in the region is that of being pious and God-fearing societies. The presence of a significant minority of non-believers in their midst disturbs and upends this comfortable and comforting stereotype of what constitutes an “authentic” and “genuine” member of the community.

The religiously and socially conservative also take offence at how atheists reject and criticise their dearest and most sacred beliefs, but usually have no qualms about heaping insult on atheists, often disparaging atheism as a psychological disorder or even a Satanic cult.

This disproportionate and exaggerated fear and loathing stands in stark contrast to the reality of atheists, one of the region’s most marginalised minorities; who are, at best, begrudgingly tolerated and, at worst, actively persecuted, sometimes by the state, at other times by society, and often by both.

For their part, a growing number of atheists are coming out of the closet, expressing themselves more assertively, demanding that society accept them, safeguard their rights to freely express their views and protect their safety and integrity.

Prime-time Atheism

Lebanese television host Tony Khalife recently took aim at atheists. “If you want to be an atheist, you’re free to be so, God will reckon with you,” the TV presenter said on the al-Jadid channel. “But if, over and above your atheism, you make fun of our prophets, the things we hold sacred and our saints and you use terms as despicable as you are, we will not allow you to.”¹

It is unclear what exactly had offended Khalife. However, clues may present themselves from a few years ago, when the Lebanese presenter moderated a debate between two non-believers and two clerics, in which he and the men of religion took deep offence from the rationalistic criticisms of religion presented by the sceptics.

In October 2014, Tony Khalife hosted the televised roundtable debate on the Egyptian private channel al-Qahira wel Nas, which has been viewed over two million times on YouTube alone.² On one side of the table sat Ahmed (whose full name was not mentioned during the debate), a militant atheist who started off as a hardcore Salafi, and Karim (whose full name was also not mentioned), who grew up as a Christian but abandoned his religion, first for atheism and then for a vague belief in Christ, but not in the Bible, after claiming to have seen Jesus in a vision. On the other side of the table sat an Azharite sheikh and a Coptic priest.

The journey from Islamic fundamentalism to atheism may seem odd at first sight but it is not uncommon. One recent example which received considerable public attention was the case of Noha Mahmoud Salem. A doctor by training, Salem had been raised in a pious family and went on to marry a Salafist and to wear the niqab (full face veil). When her husband slapped her face and her father defended his right to do so, Salem started questioning her religion and delving deeper into its various tenets, and what she discovered shattered the foundations of her faith, even the comforting spiritual aspects, such as the notion of the soul. “A human being is a series of cells with DNA that generate, get old and then die,” she observed in an interview. “After death is like before being: simply nothing.”³

The Power of Free Thought

There is a conviction amongst the Islamic establishment that atheism is a reaction to the distorted picture of Islam perpetuated by extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism. And in some cases this is how it begins, but not in the way they think. For example, a young Iraqi who witnessed and lived the persecution meted out by the Islamic State ended up abandoning his faith. However, this young man was not a Muslim but a Christian. “There were a lot of questions in my mind about Christianity already. I started to question it before ISIS. After ISIS I went to research more. I discovered what religion was really about,” he said in an interview.⁴

A vital factor is the freedom to question and the opportunity to investigate these questions, a rational process which was commonplace for the Mu’tazilites and others during the Abbasid era but has become rather dangerous in today’s Iraq, leading either to a restoration of faith or its abandonment. The revolutionary wave which started nearly a decade ago, and whose precursors

had been brewing for the decade before that, has provided just such an opportunity, even when Arab states try to crack down or limit access to knowledge, and has proven to be an eye-opener for many, secularists and conservatives alike. “It was an explosion of ideas for me and also for Egypt: YouTube channels and quarrels on TV shows. Everyone had an opinion and a party,” recalls an ex-Salafi who became an atheist, whose identity I am concealing because he now lives in Saudi Arabia where atheism is outlawed, defined as “terrorism” and potentially carries the death penalty. “As an Islamist, I learned more about secularism and liberalism (and I believe all of Egypt began to learn about all of Egypt). I am an avid reader and I began to read like crazy about religion and atheism... All this resulted in my ditching religion in 2013.”

This means that the narrative which has emerged that the distorted image of Islam presented by religious extremists, such as the Islamic State and other jihadist groups or even the Muslim Brotherhood, is the main cause of this drift away from Islam is inaccurate. Therefore, the logic informing al-Azhar’s controversial campaign to combat atheism by teaching what it regards as moderate Islam is unlikely to succeed in swaying the convictions of non-believers. This initiative has seen, among other things, scholars from al-Azhar, which has produced its fair share of atheists and sceptics over the years, set up kiosks in the metro and other public spaces to answer people’s questions and present an undistorted image of their religion. But even by the grand institution’s own admission, it is losing the war of ideas: a few years ago, it claimed that there were only 866 atheists in Egypt but has since revised this estimate upwards to a more believable two million.⁵

Testing Faith

In fact, some reach atheism from the other side of the spectrum. For a surprising number of atheists I know and have spoken to in the context of my research and journalism, their abandonment of faith was, paradoxically, actually the product of an attempt to deepen it and to understand religion better. “When I started university in the 1980s, I realised that I was very knowledgeable about lots of things, except my own religion. So I decided that I was going to delve deep into it and be as expert as possible,” Egyptian atheist Ayman Abdel-Fattah told me, admitting that what he learnt “gave me the shock of my life.”

Rather than a reaction against extremism, this quest and questioning is often triggered by mainstream religion. Atheists I have interviewed or spoken to often point to what they regard as the contradictions and inconsistencies in religion, not only in the extremist interpretation of it. “I began questioning and doubting everything around me, mostly because of the oppression of women in the Middle East,” confessed a young woman who asked to be referred to as Maya (not her real name) because she is currently living in Saudi Arabia.

After connecting with fellow doubters online, Maya decided to jettison her faith, but the change was only internal to begin with. “At first, I was still a hijabi while being a non-believer, but after a year I made the decision: I’m no longer allowing this whole society I live in to choose what I wear.” This is, of course, more easily said than done in restrictive Saudi Arabia, where Maya must wrap herself in a black abaya when she ventures outside.

The life-threatening consequences of being an open non-believer means that atheists in Saudi Arabia must live in cloistered secrecy, which can be a very lonely existence. “I’m as closeted as ever,” reflects Maya. “It makes me feel anxious and I struggle with myself. I sometimes ask myself: What if I’m wrong and everyone who is on the opposite side is right? That self-confidence I have when I’m surrounded by other non-believers or slightly open-minded people, like in Egypt, for example, makes me want to leave here asap.”

However, there does exist a vibrant atheistic underground in Saudi Arabia, which communicates mainly online although some do dare to gather in person. “We non-believers have meetings and groups in a lot of Saudi cities,” one Saudi atheist was quoted as saying. “If you go into them, then you will be shocked by the numbers and elements of society represented.”⁶

Criminalising Contempt

The sheikh hosted by Tony Khalife dismissed the atheist guest Ahmed’s opinions as “contempt”, “effrontery” and “insolence”, with the presenter ending the encounter with an apology to viewers who may have felt offence. Khalife and the sheikh’s choice of words were likely not accidental, as contempt of religion is effectively outlawed in Egypt.

In fact, Egypt’s legal framework is as polarised and confused as was this debate. Egypt’s self-image is of a country where “freedom of belief is absolute”, as stated in Article 64 of the current constitution.⁷ However, Egypt also sees itself as a pious country of devout believers where perceived insults to the faith cause public outrage. What this means is that although Egypt does not outlaw atheism, its penal code does effectively make blasphemy a punishable offence. For example, Article 98(f), which was originally passed in 1981 to protect religious minorities, has in recent years been weaponised by Islamists and the state to target Christians, secular critics and atheists.⁸

Taking this rationale to its illogical conclusion, the rubberstamp Egyptian parliament attempted to exploit the notion that atheism is, by its very existence, insulting to religion. When defending his proposal for a bill to outlaw atheism in December 2017, Amr Hamroush, the head of the parliament’s religious committee, said: “[Atheism] must be criminalised and categorised as contempt of religion because atheists have no doctrine and try to insult the Abrahamic religions.”⁹ Since then, the bill appears to have been shelved and left to quietly die.

This ambiguity has left non-believers in a precarious situation, at the mercy of the whims of individuals in Egypt’s labyrinthine and powerful security apparatuses, prosecutors’ offices and the judiciary. For some, this means that they successfully manage to navigate the country’s wobbly social and legal tightrope and enjoy the freedom to express their religious views without facing any serious consequences.

Others, however, are not so fortunate, with some even falling foul of the system repeatedly. This was the case with Sherif Gaber. The young freethinker first entered the public eye as a student at Suez Canal University following a smear campaign in 2013 by faculty members who did not approve of his views supporting homosexuality and criticising religion. Following his sentencing

on blasphemy charges in 2015, Gaber was released on bail pending a retrial. He went underground but courageously refused to be silenced. Gaber ran a popular anti-religion YouTube channel where the videos he produced have been viewed millions of times.¹⁰

When attempting to flee Egypt in 2018, Gaber was arrested at the airport. After his release, he went into hiding again until he could work out a way to flee the country. His Twitter posts from the time reflect the huge emotional and psychological toll his situation as an intellectual fugitive was taking on him. “I feel so weak. so numb. I feel so empty that I can’t understand the feeling of anything,” he posted on Twitter in July 2019. “I feel this weight on my chest that I can’t breath[e]. I can’t think. I hear so many voices. And yet no one. I miss the feeling of no pain.”¹¹ It is unclear whether Gaber is still in Egypt or has managed to relocate. His Twitter account has gone silent on the subject. On his Instagram page, he posted a photo on 14 March 2020, without comment, of a plane taking off¹² and other photos show him in locations that do not look like Egypt.

Silencing and Shaming

This kind of hostility and outrage in the Arabic-language media targeted at non-believers has become quite commonplace in recent years. This is partly driven by sensation-seeking broadcasters who wish, on the one hand, to appear tolerant and open-minded while on the other hand projecting a faux image of piety and self-righteous moral superiority.

The TV debate chaired by Tony Khalife was mild and civilised compared with some of the other televised standoffs involving atheists in recent years. In February 2018, atheist Mohamed Nofal (referred to in the programme as Mohamed Hisham) appeared on the private Egyptian channel al-Hadath al-Youm. “Basically, I went on this talk show to help normalise leaving Islam. The main reasons that motivated me to go public were the injustice that I’ve experienced and witnessed my whole life,” Nofal explained to me. “Many minorities that live in a majority Islamic country suffer prejudice and discrimination from both the state and the public, in the name of Islam.”

Nofal’s hopes of receiving a fair hearing were quickly dashed. The soft-spoken atheist was constantly interrupted by the host and the cleric. Deputy Sheikh of al-Azhar Mahmoud Ashour, rather than debate the *Origin of Species* with the young freethinker, instead insisted on asking about the background of Nofal’s family, blithely dismissing atheism as a psychological disorder that requires treatment. Mahmoud Abdel-Haleem, the presenter, gave Nofal a long, insulting lecture before kicking him out of the studio and advising him to go straight to a psychiatric hospital.¹³

The trope likening atheism to a mental disorder is a surprisingly common one, which possibly stems from the conviction that Islam is a rational religion and that faith is the natural order, so anyone who disbelieves must be disturbed and some kind of deviant. “An Arab atheist is usually a parasite – someone who claims to be knowledgeable but is not and will probably eventually commit suicide,” wrote Mohammad Al-Buraidi, a columnist at the Saudi Gazette. “An Arab atheist is usually a drunk, certainly a degenerate and has definitely nothing to offer.”¹⁴

Another fairly common myth about atheists is that they are Satanists, and this dangerous fiction can sometimes be spread by people in positions of authority. For example, when an alleged ‘atheist cafe’ was shut down in Cairo, a senior official claimed that it had been the venue of “Satan worship, rituals and dances. There were also Satanic drawings at the entrance.”¹⁵

Ejecting atheists from the studio has become something of a habit on Egypt’s private television channels. Four years before the incident involving Nofal, the sensationalist Riham Said, who hosted a show called Sabaya al-Kheir on al-Nahar TV, threw out Noha Mahmoud Salem, the ex-Salafi doctor mentioned above.¹⁶

Such sensationalism, incitement and demonisation in the mass media has real-life consequences. For example, Mohamed Nofal began to fear for his safety and security following his television appearance. “I got extremely negative responses, mostly violent in nature and controlling to the extent where I had to pretend to be a Muslim to avoid the death and prison threats,” he recalled. “From family, I got physically assaulted and I was threatened with prison by a relative police officer. I saw people on social media discussing who should kill me: a random citizen or the government. it was surreal and frightening.”

With the aid of a GoFundMe campaign set up by Western activists,¹⁷ Nofal fled to Europe, where he sought asylum in Germany. Although Nofal is grateful that he has found a safe refuge and is living in a society where he can express his views freely, some Arab atheists who flee their countries find the adjustment difficult and end up returning home, despite the potential risks involved.

This was the case with two atheists I know who returned to Egypt after living in Europe for several years. One even had a pending court case against him while the other had been persecuted by his own family for his beliefs and sexuality, yet both found the uncertainty and trauma of life back home preferable to the sense of isolation and alienation they felt abroad. This underscores the tension between philosophical and social belonging, where Arab atheists may find themselves torn between a society that is sympathetic to their intellectual stances but hostile towards their cultural roots and another society which is hostile towards their ideas but sympathetic towards their culture.

Battling the “Atheism Tsunami”

There is a popular conviction among establishment voices that Egypt is being swept by a ‘tsunami of atheism’, in the words of Amr Adeeb, the loud-mouthed Egyptian TV host.¹⁸ In my analysis, rather than experiencing a tsunami of unbelief, Egyptian and Arab society have, in reality, kept atheists hidden behind a dam of wilful ignorance. This dam is now fracturing with a trickle leaking out of the cracks.

Whether conscious or subconscious, one motive behind viewing atheism as a new phenomenon is to depict it as something alien and imported from the West and, hence, inauthentic to Arab societies, despite research showing that the process is local, though it does borrow some ideas and concepts from Western thought and philosophy.¹⁹ Besides, even a cursory look at history

would rapidly dispel any illusions that atheism and religious scepticism are anything new to Islam. In fact, they stretch back from the very dawn of Islam right down to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As if to underscore this point, the prominent Egyptian existentialist philosopher and poet, Abdel-Rahman Badawi, who clashed with Egypt's Nasser and was imprisoned by Libya's Gaddafi, published, in 1945, an encyclopaedic history of atheism in the Islamic context, which he described as "one of the most fascinating and fertile international currents of atheism in the spiritual history of humanity".²⁰

Classical Islamic scholars tended to tolerate atheism and unbelief theologically and intellectually, as demonstrated by the proliferation of freethinkers in the early centuries of Islam. Moreover, "apostasy" was not outlawed in and of itself, but was to be combated if the "apostate" declared war on society, i.e. scholars viewed it as primarily a political rather than theological issue. "The reason to kill an apostate is only with the intent to eliminate the danger of war, and not for the reason of his disbelief," opined Ibn al-Humam, a 15th century Egyptian jurist and theologian. "Therefore, only such an apostate shall be killed who is actively engaged in war."²¹

Commanders of the Faithful

In Saudi Arabia, those found guilty of atheism or 'apostasy' are dealt with harshly. They can be flogged pitilessly or receive capital punishment. For example, in 2017, one man, named in the media as Ahmad Al-Shamri, who allegedly renounced Islam and Muhammad on social media was reportedly sentenced to death.²² This is because of the kingdom's harsh religious laws and draconian security regulations, passed in 2014, which define, in Article 1, as "terrorism": "Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based."²³

In Saudi Arabia, you do not even need to be an atheist to be charged with or punished for being one – it is often enough simply to oppose the state or criticise the regime. One of the most iconic examples of this is Raif Badawi, a liberal reformer who never officially renounced his religion but was nonetheless tried for "apostasy", imprisoned for "insulting Islam" and condemned to endure 1,000 lashes (mercifully, not all inflicted due to the international public outrage) because he had dared to establish an online forum for open political debate.²⁴

While it is clear to the outsider that atheism cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, constitute terrorism, it does appear to awaken a sense of panicked terror in the hearts of Saudi Arabia's ruling elite. "Any calls that challenge Islamic rule or Islamic ideology is considered subversive in Saudi Arabia and would be subversive and could lead to chaos," the Saudi ambassador to the United Nations Abdallah al-Mouallimi said during a TV interview. "We are a country that is homogeneous in accepting Islam by the entire population."²⁵

Since the establishment of the modern Saudi state in 1932 by Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki ibn Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al Saud (also known simply as Ibn Saud), its royal family has claimed its legitimacy not from below, i.e. from the support of its subjects, but

from above, from Islam and God, as the protector of the religion's holiest sites and the upholder of Wahhabi orthodoxy as represented by its clerics. "In Saudi terms, equating atheism with terrorism does have a certain logic since atheism presents a challenge to the most fundamental principles of the Saudi state," writes Brian Whitaker, former Middle East editor at The Guardian, in his book on Arab atheists. "The Saudi state cannot accept non-belief without changing the basis on which it has been constructed."²⁶

Believe and Let Live

Given the paucity of reliable statistics and the risks of openly identifying as an atheist in some countries, it is impossible to tell for certain whether there are more atheists in the MENA region than before. However, what is clear is that the revolutionary waves that have swept the region have had a dual effect on people. On the one side, it has made the irreligious more open about their views and more assertive in demanding that society accepts them and protects their rights, as numerous atheists have demanded on Egyptian TV and in the media over the past few years.

In the most secular Arab state, Tunisia, atheists and the irreligious have emerged from the shadows to demand full equality. The small but vocal Tunisian Association of Freethinkers has been at the forefront of these efforts, speaking out on in favour of free thought and inquiry and even organising a protest demanding the right to eat and drink in public during Ramadan. Some of its members have been the victims of vigilante attacks from Islamic fanatics.²⁷

On the other, it has led to a greater understanding and acceptance of what non-belief is amongst ordinary people. For instance, at the progressive end of the Arab media, there have been efforts to portray atheists sympathetically. One example was the online al-Badil (Alternative), which describes itself as "the voice of the weak", which produced a video documentary in which a number of atheists were given the space and freedom to elaborate on their beliefs, lives, concerns and worries.²⁸

This was demonstrated, for instance, in the case of Kareem Amer, an Egyptian blogger who was jailed in 2007 for his vocal atheism. A large number of believing Muslims campaigned for his release. "Despite what Kareem said about our religion. Free speech doesn't mean speech that you approve of. It includes criticism," the organisers of the campaign said, challenging the public with: "You may be disgusted at what he said, even angered. That's okay, so are we! But we will defend with all our might his right to express such opinions, because it is his basic, inalienable human right."²⁹

It is in the interest of both the individual and society as a whole that those Arab countries which still outlaw apostasy and punish it end these inhumane practices. It is also high time that the self-appointed vigilante defenders of the faith realise that Islam, Muhammad and God do not need human bodyguards and assassins.

Equally importantly is the formal, legal acceptance of freedom of belief and conscience for all citizens. A significant step in that direction would be to remove religious affiliation from birth

certificates and identity documents where they exist, as is the case in Tunisia. Constitutions also need to be revised to remove references to Islam and Islamic law.

About the Author

Khaled Diab is an Egyptian-Belgian author and journalist.

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