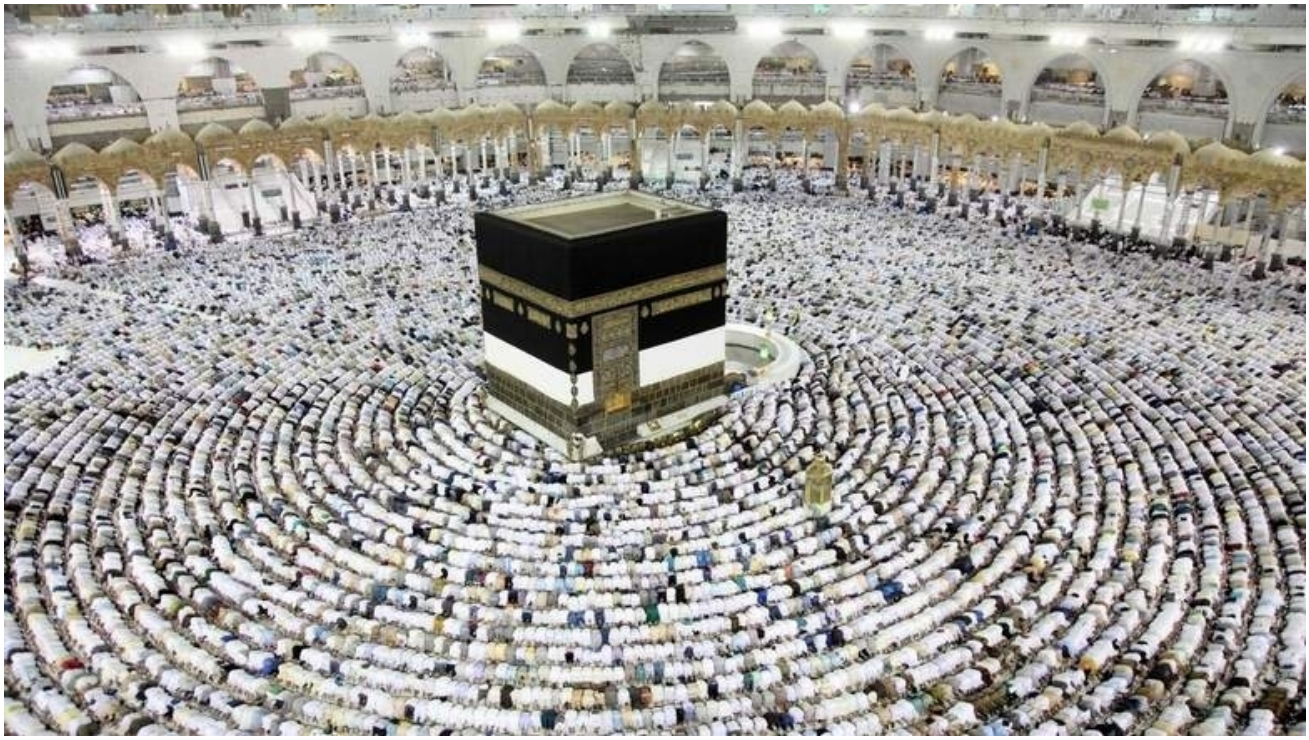
Is the Umma Shatter-Proof?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Those who belong to the community of Muslim Believers, or the Umma, are commanded to endorse *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, literally "loyalty and disavowal," a concept which signifies loving and hating for the sake of Allah. Among other things, Believers are to love those who are obedient to Allah – that is, fellow Muslims – and to defend and assist them. Hating for the sake of Allah signifies showing anger towards those who oppose Allah, that is all non-Muslims.

A few recent news items suggest that Muslim solidarity is not what it's cracked up to be.

Here's a story about Turkish unhappiness with Syrian refugees:

> *Authorities in Istanbul set a four-week deadline on July 22 for Syrians living without approval in Turkey's largest city to return to provinces where they are registered or face forced removal to those regions.*

It was not immediately clear how many people could be affected by the order, but Istanbul's new mayor has said that a total of 1 million Syrians live in the city compared with Interior Ministry figures showing 500,000 are registered.

Turkey's recession-hit economy and high levels of unemployment have fueled anger against the 3.6 million Syrians living in Turkey, the largest refugee population to have fled the eight-year-old civil war in neighboring Syria.

Turks who are resentful of the Syrians view them as offering cheap labor and taking jobs from Turks, and using services including health and education.

Monday's order in Istanbul follows two clashes in the city earlier this year when crowds attacked Syrian shops and properties. There have also been reports of some Syrians being returned to northern Syria.

Most Syrians live in southern Turkish provinces near the Syrian border but Istanbul province, in the northwest, has the largest Syrian population of any province in the country.

Syrians who have a temporary protection permit must stay in the province where they are registered, and obtain a special permit to travel elsewhere in Turkey.

The Istanbul governor's office said on Monday that Syrians who have temporary protection permits in provinces other than Istanbul have until Aug. 20 to return to those provinces, and will be returned if they stay after that date.

Syrians who do not have temporary protection permits will be sent to provinces specified by the Interior Ministry, it said.

There have been several reports in recent weeks of Syrians being deported to Syria. Reuters has spoken to three people who said they were sent without their consent to areas of

> *northern Syria controlled by Ankara and Turkey-backed rebels in the past few days.*
>
> *The three told Reuters they were forced to sign a document that said they were voluntarily returning to Syria. One of the men said he was deported with at least 100 other Syrians.*
>
> *The Turkish government has not commented on the reports of deportations.*
>
> *Turkey is a signatory to agreements that bind it to a non-refoulement principle, an international customary law rule that prohibits countries from returning people to a place where they risk facing persecution or threat to life.*

The Turks are not inclined to offer continued solidarity with the Syrian Muslims. There are too many of those Syrians – 3.6 million – and they've outstayed their welcome. The Turks have had it with Syrians receiving free schooling and medical care from the state. Their anger is quite a contrast with the European nations that continue to uncomplainingly offer Muslim economic migrants not just education and medical care but also free or highly subsidized housing, unemployment benefits (without the need to have first been employed in the country), and family allowances.

They are also angry that Syrians – those that do work – offer cheap labor, driving down the wages of Turkish workers. That groups of Turks have violently attacked Syrians, for costing them jobs and lowering their wages, is a sign of how bad relations between the Turks and their fellow Muslims from Syria have become.

By sending back to the provinces where they were first registered possibly a half-million people (out of an estimated total of one million Syrians now in Istanbul) the Turkish government is declaring Istanbul, the largest city in the country, off-limits to 3.1 out of 3.6 million Syrians. Those

who had not been registered, but been employed by Turks, or had started little shops, will lose those jobs and their shops will close. They will have to start over, if they can, in the provinces. Their lives are now for the second time being uprooted: first when they fled from Syria to Turkey, and now, when they are banished from Istanbul and the lives they had created for themselves. The fact that some Syrians have started to be forcibly sent back to Syria, after first having been made to sign documents claiming they were "voluntarily" returning home, signals that Turkey is determined to rid itself of as many of these Syrians as quickly as possible. Many Turks are just fed up with the Syrians. A recent survey by Kadir Has University in Istanbul found that 67.7 percent of the participants were "not content with the presence of Syrian refugees" in Turkey. A popular hashtag is #UlkemdeSuriyeliIstemiyorum (I don't want Syrians in my country) that had been around has reappeared on social media. The newly-elected mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, after being elected, said that "the refugee issue is a severe trauma" in some districts. And even President Erdogan has noted that Turkey has now spent $37 billion on Syrian refugees.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Muslim economic migrants, including some Syrians, continue to have every possible benefit lavished upon them, without experiencing any of the troubles that Syrians experience in Turkey. Muslim migrants – now mainly Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans – find greater generosity among non-Muslim hosts than among fellow members of the umma; it's all so confusing.

A second news item comes from Lebanon, where "Palestinian" refugees – that is, the descendants of those Arabs who left what had been Mandatory Palestine just before, during, and after the 1948-49 war – have been engaged in protesting a new law regarding employment of non-Lebanese. Thousands of Palestinians protested in and around their camps on July 19 to

demand that the Lebanese government end its requirement that all undocumented non-Lebanese must obtain a work permit to gain employment.

> *The intensifying protests were triggered by the closing down of two Palestinian-owned businesses last week, with the demonstrators calling on the government to reconsider its crackdown on undocumented non-Lebanese workers that they say is affecting their livelihood.*
>
> *Critics have claimed that the Ministry of Labour's recent measures are part of a campaign directed at the larger Syrian refugee population to force them to return home.*
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> *Speaking to a local TV station on Thursday, Camille Abu Sleiman, Lebanon's labour minister, said the ministry was simply enforcing the laws that regulate foreign laborers in the country and denied targeting Palestinians.*

True, the new measures did not target the Palestinians. But nor did it exempt them.

> *But the Palestinian refugees, who are already barred by Lebanese from working in dozens of professions as part of a long-standing policy to discourage them from staying in the country, fear the move will hit their employment opportunities further.*

In Lebanon, where Palestinians have lived for decades, they have generally been denied citizenship, unless they marry Lebanese. The majority of them still are confined to camps, living in wretched conditions. They are denied the right to practice many professions. Such treatment has as its main purpose preventing the Palestinians from integrating successfully into the larger society, where they could no longer be held up as people whose situation can only be ameliorated if they are allowed to return to "Palestine." They

are political pawns of the Arab states where they live, which do not wish to improve their lot but to keep them in conditions designed to win international sympathy for their "right of return."

> *"The Palestinian worker is not a foreign visitor but rather a refugee forcibly living in Lebanon," Fathi Abu Ardat, an official at the Palestinian Authority (PA) embassy, told reporters earlier in the week.*

The Palestinians are not forced to live in Lebanon. There are other Arab countries to which some of them could move. There is work for them in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. Many Palestinians already work in the Gulf Arab states, where the natives rely on large numbers of foreign workers. 240,000 Palestinians now work in Saudi Arabia. 200,000 live and work in Kuwait, which is down from 400,000 before the Gulf War, when the Palestinians sided with the Iraqi invaders, and as a consequence many were expelled:. But everywhere in the Arab lands obtaining citizenship is made exceedingly difficult for them to obtain.

The Palestinians now protesting against the new law in Lebanon, whereby the undocumented must obtain work permits, are not just angry about this law. They are angry that they cannot, except in special cases, become citizens, that they are still prohibited from practicing certain professions (though in 2005 70 previously prohibited occupations were opened to them). They are angry that so many of them continue to be made to live in a dozen camps, in wretched conditions, many with open sewers, where they endure miserable conditions so that the Arabs can score political points against the Israelis, who are always to be blamed.

And the Palestinians are no doubt angry, too, at the 1.5 million Syrians who are now in Lebanon, with whom they must share whatever private charitable funds exist for refugees in

Lebanon, while previously that money was spent only on Palestinians. They are angry that the Syrians will work for wages even lower than what the Palestinians receive. As for the Lebanese, they clearly don't care for the well-being of the Palestinians; they could so easily make their lives easier, just by allowing them to practice more of the professions still prohibited to them, or allowing them to work in the pubic sector, or even giving them the right to own property. And the Lebanese have lost whatever fleeting sympathy they may have had for the Syrians, but now are eager to see them return home, since the civil war has wound down. The Syrians in Lebanon express no fellow-feeling for the Palestinians, whom they see only as rivals for relief. Palestinian protesters in Lebanon were not so much protesting against the new law that requires the undocumented to acquire work permits as they were protesting the application of that law to them. They don't care if it applies to the Syrians.

You can preach about *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'* all you want, but in Lebanon, pocketbook issues rule, and among the Lebanese, the Palestinians, and the Syrians, there is no love lost.

A third example of a split in the Umma has to do with the reaction of Muslims, and non-Muslims, to the savage repression of the Uighurs and the campaign against Islam in China. Here is some of what the Chinese government has done:

> *The government in 2017 passed laws requiring all restaurants to stay open during Ramadan. Further, it has forbidden teachers, civil servants, and all those working in the public sector from observing Ramadan, and if any are caught doing so, "they will be dealt with."*

Muslims have been required to hand in their own Qur'ans to the government if those copies were published before 2012. The reason for this is that in 2012, the Chinese government prepared "new" Qur'ans, heavily censored, with the "meaning''

of the verses that remained annotated by government experts so as to lessen their anti-Infidel message, and the commands to wage Jihad carefully "contextualized." The only Qur'ans now legal in China are the versions published by the government.

Muslims in Xinjiang must request government permission to make the hajj. They are asked to register their age, job, health, and economic status. Strict guidelines are put in place for applicants, who must be aged between 50 and 70 and have lived in Urumqi, the region's capital, for at least five years. They are thoroughly investigated by the government for their political views; anyone who has displayed the slightest hint of being politically unreliable is denied permission to go on the hajj.

Furthermore, all those who apply to go on the hajj must also pledge allegiance to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to national unity (and therefore against Uighur independence).

Indeed, Muslims who travel abroad for any reason, not just for the hajj, upon their return are subject to particular scrutiny, especially if they have spent any time in Muslim countries. More than one million Uighurs – recent reports claim a figure of two million – have been placed in reeducation centers, subject to anti-Muslim propaganda, and forced constantly to express their loyalty to the Communist Party, lest they have been exposed to "subversive" ideas about Islam, especially if they have traveled abroad and met with non-Chinese Muslims, or have been exposed to dangerous Islamic websites online.

As for other restrictions on Islam, in Xinjiang, imams have been subject to public humiliation by being forced to dance en masse in public, and at the same time, have been forced to make an oath to keep children away from religion, and as public servants, paid by the state, the imams have been forced to brandish the slogan that "our income comes from the CKP,

not from Allah." Many of the imams were forced to wave Chinese flags during their ordeal. Speeches were made – it's unclear from the reports if these were by Chinese government officials or by government-approved imams – in which young people were told both to stay away from mosques and that prayer, wherever it was said, was harmful to one's health. Teachers throughout Xinjiang have been instructed to teach children to stay away from religion; retired teachers have been posted outside mosques during Ramadan to prevent students from entering.

Mosques have been required to push Communist propaganda, swapping inscriptions about Muhammad for red banners that declare, "Love the Party, Love the Country."

Muslim men have been required to shave "abnormal" or "religious" beards. Punishment is strict; one man was sentenced to six years in jail for refusing to do so. Names given to children must not be "religious." Twenty-nine names have been banned so far, such as Islam, Saddam, Mecca, Quran, Jihad, Medina; all are now strictly forbidden. Women may not wear any veils that cover the face; even women wearing only the hijab have been prevented in some parts of Xinjiang from using buses. Muslims are required to listen to the official state television (that carries anti-Muslim and pro-Communist propaganda), and cannot prevent their children from attending state schools, where anti-religion messages are strong.

And now we hear stories of those reeducation camps, where at least one million Uighurs are confined, and subject to non-stop anti-Islam and pro-Party propaganda. There were protests, all right, against this "reeducation." A letter, signed by 22 nations, was sent to the president of the U.N. Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, calling on China to end its massive detention program in Xinjiang, a group of 37 countries submitted a similar letter in defense of China's policies.

In this letter, the signatories express concern about

“credible reports of arbitrary detention” in Xinjiang and “widespread surveillance and restrictions” particularly targeting Uighurs and other minorities. The signatories call on China to uphold its national laws and international commitments, including those it has made as a member of the Human Rights Council, and “refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uighurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang.”

Those who signed that letter criticizing China include: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

Then a second letter was sent to the same people – the president of the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights – supporting the right of China to treat the Uighurs as it is doing. The signatories expressed their opposition to “politicizing human rights” and reiterated China’s defense of what Beijing calls “vocation education and training centers” and critics call detention centers or “reeducation camps.” Reuters quotes a passage in which the signatories justify China’s efforts: “Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centers.”

This second letter in support of China was signed by 37 countries: Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Kuwait, Laos, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

Eighteen of those countries are Muslim-majority, and they include several of the most important ones – Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE.

What does it mean when 22 non-Muslim states criticize the persecution of the Muslim Uighurs, while no Muslim states do, but 18 Muslim states are willing to support, by denying, that same persecution of fellow Muslims?

Why did these Muslim states do this? They have weighed in the balance their supposed loyalty to fellow members of the Umma, the Uighurs, with what good relations with mighty China can mean for them. They know the Chinese will not take kindly to those who criticize its policies. Muslim states are a particular worry for China, because their opposition might especially hearten the Uighurs.

What can the Muslim nations lose by criticizing China's crackdown on the Uighurs? China is now the biggest importer of oil in the world; it carefully spreads its imports among more than a dozen states, and it could easily drop a few of its current suppliers – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman come immediately to mind – were they to have been critical of its Uighur policy.

As for Egypt, it is heavily dependent on Chinese aid, investments, and tourists. China has invested more than $20 billion in Egypt in recent years. The China State Engineering Corporation has been contracted to build 20 towers in New Cairo, including what is billed as the tallest tower in Africa, in a separate contract. The Chinese conglomerate TEDA-Suez is expanding its industrial zone near the Red Sea port of Ain Sokhna.

The number of Chinese tourists visiting Egypt more than doubled in 2017 to 300,000, from the year before, and in 2018, 500,000 Chinese tourists went to Egypt. In 2019, the Egyptians expect a similar increase from the year before; these visits

are encouraged by the ever-expanding number of charter flights between the two countries.

All of that – the investments, the aid, the tourists – could have been lost had Egypt criticized China's Uighur policy. The decision was easy.

Had the Pakistani government criticized the Chinese over the Uighurs, that would have had a catastrophic effect on the country. For China and Pakistan have forged a close military connection. China has far surpassed the US as the biggest weapons supplier to Pakistan. In 2018, Beijing declared its largest defense export deal, one worth $4 billion, to supply eight new submarines to Pakistan. China now calls Pakistan its "iron brother"; China is its main weapons supplier, as well as Pakistan's preferred training partner for complex military exercises, including the use of modern technology for air battle. If Pakistan had dared to criticize the treatment of the Uighurs, it could have lost its most important arms supplier, and military ally.

In Turkey, resentment of the Syrian migrants has led to attacks by Turks on Syrian-owned stores; half-a-million of the one million Syrians in Istanbul have been given a month to return to the provinces where they are officially registered. Some Syrians have even been "escorted" back to Syria. The new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, has described the Syrian refugee situation as a "severe trauma"; Erdogan has publicly noted, with chagrin, the huge cost to Turkey of funding these Syrians – $37 billion and counting.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese, weary of playing host, would like both the Palestinians and the Syrians to leave. They have just passed legislation requiring non-Lebanese to obtain work permits for any employment; the Palestinians promptly protested, hysterically describing this as "racism." The Lebanese lack of enthusiasm for enduring the refugee presence has become palpable. The 1.6 million Syrians are also being

urged to return home, now that the civil war has essentially ended. On May 9, Lebanese president Michel Aoun declared that Lebanon would never survive if half a million Palestinian refugees and 1.6 million Syrian refugees remained in the country. Many Lebanese, not only the Christians, agree with him. And meanwhile, the Syrians and the Palestinians in Lebanon vie for the menial jobs that are open to them, a competition that only increases the hostility they already feel for each other.

The last example of a splintered Umma is the failure of a single Muslim state to make common cause with the Uighurs. Not a single Muslim state signed the letter denouncing China's mistreatment of the Uighurs, while 18 Muslim states supported China's policy. Up until February, Ankara condemned China's "reintroduction of internment camps in the 21st century." But then, in July, on an official visit to China, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an said that Uighurs lead happy lives in China. He went on to say that some governments were seeking to "abuse" the Xinjiang crisis to jeopardize Turkey's economic relationship with China. The Chinese knew that the Turks, closely related by ethnicity to the Uighurs, were the most important to convince not to criticize China's policy. Chinese economic threats must have been enormous and in the end, Erdogan capitulated. Raison d'etat prevailed, with him as with every other Muslim leader.

These three examples suggest that in the end, despite all the talk of the unbreakable bonds among Muslims, those bonds can and do break, quite easily in fact. We have seen in Turkey, between Turks and Syrian refugees, in Lebanon among Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians, and in all the Muslim lands, where China's economic power is felt and feared, and loyalty to fellow Muslims – in this case Uighurs – crumbles into dust. The Umma is not shatter-proof. If you are an Infidel, that's comforting to know.

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