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Islamism, Moroccan-Style: The Ideas of Sheikh Yassine

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Is Morocco's monarchy vulnerable to Islamist challenge? For now, the answer would appear to be "no." The Moroccan monarchy, unlike the classic "revolutionary" Arab republics (Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt), explicitly invokes religion as part of its legitimizing formula. The Alawite dynasty, which has ruled the country since the late 1600s, claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad; according to the Moroccan constitution the king is "commander of the faithful" (*amir al-mu'minin*), conferring upon him supreme spiritual as well as temporal power. This claim to religious legitimacy, personified in the monarch himself, is even more far-reaching than that of other Arab monarchies where Islam is also invoked to legitimize kingly rule (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Jordan).

Yet Morocco does have its own Islamist movement, led by a man who is erudite, charismatic, and venerated by his followers. Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, age seventy-four, is the *murshid* (guide) for Morocco's largest Islamist organization, the officially outlawed but reluctantly tolerated Jami'at al-'Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity Group, JCG). Yassine's pronouncements and prolific writings (more than twenty books), once circulated clandestinely, are now disseminated more openly, thanks to the liberalization of public life in recent years.^[1] In addition, he himself became a cause célèbre during the 1990s among Morocco's liberal, human rights community, as well as among Islamists, for having been incarcerated or confined to house arrest. His release in May 2000, after 17 years, was a major media event.

Yassine lost his freedom because of his refusal to play the role of the loyal oppositionist. His 1974 missive to King Hassan II, "Islam or the Deluge,"^[2] which called on the king to step down, landed Yassine in a psychiatric hospital for three years and was the beginning of his ongoing confrontation with the regime. More recently, he has openly challenged the new young king, Muhammad VI, to take actions to atone for his father's "crimes." The JCG regularly tests the limits of regime tolerance and has proven its ability to mobilize large numbers of followers, whether to defy government bans on Islamic seaside "summer camps," to demonstrate over the status of women, or to protest against Israel. With Morocco in the midst of a halting, controlled and yet unmistakable process of liberalization, the Islamist current, and particularly the JCG, has become an established force in the country's social and political firmament. One manifestation of the increased strength of the Islamist trend is the outcome of Morocco's most recent parliamentary elections. While the JCG boycotted the vote, the legal Islamist Party of Justice and Development tripled its

number of seats in parliament, receiving 13 percent of the ballots.

As compared to the record of Islamists in Algeria and Egypt, Moroccan Islamism has been almost pacifist, rejecting violence as a tool to Islamicize society. The exceptions are extremely rare. One small, violent group operated into the 1980s. An attack on a Marrakesh hotel in 1994, which left several persons dead, brought to light an international ring of violent Islamists (backed, according to the Moroccan authorities, by Algerian intelligence). In recent years, radical Algerian Islamists may have found succor and shelter in areas of Morocco adjacent to the Algerian border.^[3] And during summer 2002, an alleged "*salafi-jihadi*" group was arrested and charged with a number of crimes. As Yassine himself has warned:

Impatient activism that leads organizations of desperate youths to intolerance and counter-violence and that engages in the logic of violence will only delay the arrival of better days.^[4]

Nonetheless, the involvement of Moroccans and French-Moroccan Muslims in al-Qa'ida's far-flung network gives pause. The history of contemporary radical religious movements is full of examples in which violent actions by individuals emerge from wider ideological milieus, even if the specific teachings of religious leaders frown on violence. Given that Morocco is one of the Arab Muslim countries most intimately linked to the West—geographically, culturally, politically, and economically—the question of Yassine's teachings has a significance that reaches far beyond Morocco.

Repudiating the West

At the heart of Yassine's world-view is one basic assumption, which he shares with Islamist thinkers everywhere. It is the supremacy of Islamic civilization and a vision of a Muslim world destined to surpass the West. He finds the evidence in the Qur'an, God's unadulterated message for all time and for all humanity.

Following ample precedent, Yassine holds that the most perfect human society, the one closest to realizing God's message, was the one created and directed by the Prophet Muhammad in the last ten years of his life, and perpetuated by his four "rightly guided" successors, the *rashidun*. From that point on until today, absolutist rule and bad governance have held sway among Muslims. However, the "alternation of days," the "rotation of civilizations," is one of God's promises.^[5] And this promise, Yassine stipulates confidently, will be realized some time within the next two to three decades.^[6]

Yassine's notion of a "cyclical order," referring to the rise and fall of civilizations, evokes the fourteenth-century writer Ibn Khaldun. But Yassine makes no reference to the Islamic world's greatest philosopher of history. Apparently, Ibn Khaldun's message does not fit: Ibn Khaldun writes exclusively about the rise and fall of Muslim dynasties; his is a truly cyclical theory of history, with every new dominant order carrying the seeds of its own demise. Yassine, while positing a cyclical theory of history, avoids all mention of what might come after the "new and unified Islamic civilization," whose historical inevitability is confirmed by the Prophet's reference to a future "second Caliphate." Presumably, a just, new Islamic order will last indefinitely, or at least, as long as Muslims remain true to their faith. Yassine thus offers an Islamist version of the "end of history."

If there is a difference between Yassine and some contemporary Islamists, it lies in his familiarity with the West. Unlike Ayatollah Khomeini, who had never heard of Bach, Verdi, or Beethoven,^[7] Yassine is conversant with the intellectual and cultural production of the West, particularly with its philosophers of history. He is particularly fond of quoting Arnold Toynbee, Oswald Spengler, and Samuel Huntington, all of whom fit neatly into his worldview because all of them predict the ultimate decline of the West. And his "historical logic," while derived from the Qur'an, is seemingly confirmed by contemporary demographics: the West, he writes, is aging and falling "inexorably into decrepitude," while "Islamic youth flowers arborescently. The statistics announce a rotation in the history of civilization." Indeed, the "post-modern," "Asiatic world" is already here: the West has lost its lead to Japan and southeast Asia, and China is waiting in the wings. The "post-post," Islamic era, he says, is sure to follow.^[8]

Unlike bin Ladinism, however, Yassine rejects Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations" and its grim prediction of future conflict between Islam and the West. According to Yassine, since Islam will inevitably triumph, Huntington's call to arms will only result in needless bloodshed. It would be better for the West to accept the fact of its decline and enter into a true dialogue with Islam, to the benefit of all.

The decline of the West, the inevitability of Islam's triumph, and the acute need for Muslims to work to bring it about is bound up with Yassine's view of modernity and its globalized culture as "superficial," even "bestial." Drawing on the French sociologist Alain Toraine, Yassine sees modernity as an ideology that eradicates the sacred, the divine, and the purportedly irrational, in favor of the "natural law of reason." Modernity's superiority is ostensibly self-evident. For its adherents, everything that stands in modernity's way is insignificant and must be crushed. This, says Yassine, "is the pretext invented for the military and economic colonization of the world of the south."^[9] In Yassine's view, twentieth-century history provides ample evidence of the evils of Western-style modernity. For example, Hitlerism and the apocalypse of World War II "are nothing but the decisive manifestation of a modern notion of progress founded on reason and committed entirely to efficiency."^[10]

It is here that one detects an overlap between Islamist thought and the West's own self-critics. Those in the West who indict it for unbridled capitalism, rampant consumerism, environmental degradation, and the negative aspects of globalization will find considerable common cause with

Yassine. In addition, they voice similar anger towards Western regimes for preaching the universality of human rights while propping up repressive dictators when their interests suit them. The Islamist discourse converges at many points with the anti-globalization, pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli, and anti-American messages disseminated by the West's own activists of the Left.

The difference, of course, is that for Yassine, the absence of the transcendent, of God as revealed to Muhammad, is at the root of all evils. "The worst beasts in God's sight are unbelievers who have no faith."[\[11\]](#) Darwin's revolt against God, he says, completed the work of Prometheus, the symbol of man's emancipation. Hence, the "bestial tenet" which underpins modernity and leaves modern humankind "squandered and wretched," sacrificing their lives "on the altar of desire as clients addicted to a consumers' market," without knowing the truth. Modernity's victims, "the southern guinea pig—very often Muslim," are in even worse shape, as they are required to sacrifice themselves for their master's good health.[\[12\]](#)

Their accomplices are "occidentalizing elites" who desire to imitate the superficiality and emptiness of Western-style modernity, while clinging to their privileged status. The response must be to "Islamicize modernity," to appropriate modernity's positive aspects, to be "canny purchasers of modernity," while never forgetting God's spiritual message as transmitted in the Qur'an, a message which links mankind's brief sojourn in the temporal world with eternity.[\[13\]](#)

Yassine is not the only Islamist to draw largely upon the West's own self-critique to make his case. He shares the method with the Sudanese Hasan at-Turabi and the Tunisian Rashid al-Ghannushi. What is significant about this approach is that it appeals precisely to those Muslims who are more fluent in Western philosophy than in the Islamic tradition. It draws in precisely those young persons who have had at least a smattering of Western education and some exposure to Western modernity.

Challenge to the King

Like all Islamists, Yassine rejects any notion of separating the spiritual and temporal spheres. Indeed, one of the primary reasons for his break with the Bouchichiya Sufi order in Morocco in the early 1970s was the refusal of the order's new leader to engage in political life.[\[14\]](#) The problem Yassine faces is how to pursue a political course in the face of an intractable regime. The Moroccan authorities' approach to the Islamist current over the last three decades has been broadly similar to its strategy regarding all political groupings: combining the use of carrot and stick to entice, co-opt, repress and/or suppress, depending on the particular circumstances and parties involved. The regime has been a savvy foe, and its strategy has been largely successful in containing Islamist currents.

The reason for that success has been the legitimacy generally accorded to the monarchy. Yassine's principled position is inherent in his 1974 missive in which he branded the institution of monarchy as contrary to Islam. But after a quarter-century, the monarchy remains resilient, and has even produced another smooth succession. In these circumstances, Yassine has refined his message. He no longer delegitimizes the monarchical institution per se, yet he has boldly challenged Muhammad VI to implement fundamental change.

That challenge was contained in a 35-page memorandum sent to the new king on November 14, 1999, and made public in early 2000. [\[15\]](#) Yassine penned the cynical and often sarcastic memorandum in French in order to reach the French-speaking Moroccan elite—which, he commented, disdains the Arabic language—and the international diplomatic and media communities. It was addressed "to whom it may concern" rather than the king, so as to avoid violating Article 23 of the Moroccan constitution, which declares the person of the king to be "inviolable and sacred."

The thrust of Yassine's broadside is to blame the king's late father, Hassan II, and the regime, for Morocco's social, economic, and political difficulties. They were, he said, the direct outgrowth of decades of systematic "looting" of the public patrimony by the royal family and its loyalists. Without redressing the huge social and economic gaps between rich and poor, Morocco would be subjected to the "blade" of the forthcoming (2010) open market with Europe. The young Muhammad VI, being "innocent of past crimes," must act decisively to justify his media-hyped nickname as "king of the poor." Given the country's enormous external debt—over \$20 billion—on the one hand, and the royal family's fabulous wealth on the other, there is only one ideal solution: he must use the family fortune to pay off the debt and allocate the savings for public investment in education and infrastructure. Thus, Morocco would be "liberated ... from the yoke of the World Bank."

Yet Yassine does not invoke Marx or social democratic philosophy. Rather, he harks back to an Islam supposedly imbued with the principles of justice and righteousness, and utterly opposed to the opulence associated with absolute monarchies. Yassine links these principles to the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife. "Poor Hassan II! Instead of behaving like a mortal concerned with his destiny after death ... he thought he was eternal ... granting himself sacred status and his poets and flatterers carte blanche to adore him." It is up to Muhammad VI, he tells the new king, to redeem the sins of his father and save him from eternal damnation by restoring the "legitimate belongings" of the people. Yassine points the new king to a precedent in Islamic history for guidance: the Umayyad ruler 'Umar (II) bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, who during his three year rule (717-20) returned expropriated wealth to the population and ordered the royal family to do the same, and who is remembered as embodying the virtues of piety, equality, and humility. [\[16\]](#)

Yassine expresses skepticism about the degree of change the new king would permit. Still he states:

However, aware of the gradual nature of any restoration, we are not in any hurry. We will remain in line with the Islamic logic, the peaceful option (*tranquille de proposition*).[\[17\]](#)

Were the monarchy to pursue this path, it would win popular recognition, and, most importantly, divine consent. Were the king to set a personal example, he writes, Morocco could begin the march towards "genuine democracy ... the only way out of dark absolutism. Such a formula would combine modern democratic procedure with the spiritual and moral values of Islam."

Is Yassine then a Western-style liberal democrat in sheikh's clothing? Hardly. To be sure, he quotes Lord Acton's dictum, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," extolling the virtues of a separation of powers in any Islamic democracy. Indeed, he believes

the organization of Islamic power has much to learn from the peaceful manner in which differences are dealt with in a democracy ... Public debate, the free expression of contrary opinion, [and] a diverse free press, aware of its responsibility, constitute the essential instruments to be borrowed from democracy.[\[18\]](#)

All of this is to be achieved through peaceful means, through persuasion and education. But he is emphatic on one thing: there is no room in a genuine Islamic society for the "religion of secularism," or anything that runs counter to Islamic law. "Our democracy," *shura* (consultation), is not Western democracy that "begins at pagan Athens and ends in 'advanced' modern societies as a secularist practice, atheistic, and immoral." *Shura*, by contrast, "has its beginning at pious Medina and remained a dead letter for nearly fourteen centuries," and waits to be put into practice by a process not yet formed.[\[19\]](#)

Yassine's political philosophy is similar to that of other Islamists who are sometimes portrayed in the West as democrats-to-be. But Yassine's approach, like theirs, suffers from a crucial flaw: it envisions a democratic process in which Islam is established in power; it cannot envision a continuation of that process that might remove Islam from power. Yassine's endorsement of some democratic principles is utilitarian and conditional.

Against the Jews

Dialogue is a theme that runs through Yassine's discourse—except when it comes to Jews. Gone is the sophisticated understanding of historical development, the sensitivity to the individual, and the desire for dialogue. The Jews are the enemy incarnate. They are intimately linked to many of

the evils of the world from Morocco, to Palestine, to Western imperialism. The Jew personifies and exemplifies the very psychology of modern man, who bears responsibility for the abject state of the world and the Muslims.[\[20\]](#)

As is so often the case among modern-day Muslim believers—thinkers, writers, and ordinary persons alike—Yassine explains the evils of Zionism and the alleged excessive influence of international Jewry by referring to an unassailable authority, the Qur'an. Citing verses of Surah al-Ma'idah, Yassine emphasizes the "treason of the renegades among the children of Israel"—those who betrayed their own prophets, nearly blasphemed God himself, and formed hostile alliances against Muhammad. In contrast to "those who call themselves Christians," the verses read, "those who are most fiercely hostile to the faithful are the Jews and nonbelievers."

To be sure, Yassine momentarily remembers to deny that "all" Jews carry negative attributes: by speaking of "renegades" among the children of Israel, he says, the Qur'an demonstrates that some were not. But his broadsides against Jews, from ancient to modern times, leave little room for distinctions between "good" and "bad" Jews. The Qur'an speaks of the "great arrogance" of the children of Israel. Indeed, "the founding Jewish dogma is arrogance itself": it is the racist principle that Jews are supposedly God's chosen people. The biblical accounts of Joshua's conquests ring true for Yassine since the cruelty of the Jews then is similar to that being exhibited today before one's very eyes. True, the Bible cannot be an authoritative source for Yassine. It is unthinkable that a prophet, Joshua, would be implicated in "the haughty arrogance of Jewish racism." Nonetheless, the biblical compilations, however distorted and however blasphemous they are, reveal the intentions—still lively in our time—of putting the "gentile" to the sword whenever an occasion for "ethnic cleansing" presents itself.[\[21\]](#) When it comes to Jews, Yassine's reading of history is blatantly "essentialist" and by any blind reading would be classified as anti-Semitic.

For Yassine, "the ordeal of Palestine" is bound up with a theme all too common in contemporary Arab and Muslim discourse: the "so-called Holocaust." Yassine does not deny the enormity of the evil perpetrated by Hitler. He even acknowledges that Jews experienced a "massacre." However, he complains bitterly that the Jews somehow managed to manipulate the world through guilt into giving them special treatment. In doing so, the Zionist leadership "proved their Hitlerian parallel" by turning on those who defeated Germany and accusing them of complicity in the massacre of Jews. Why is Hitler seen only as the murderer of Jews, he demands to know, when fifty million persons died in World War II, twenty million alone in the Soviet Union? As the "spoiled child of Protestant America so fervent in its Biblical mythologies, the state of Israel and its formidable propaganda apparatus in the United States—press, radio, and television channels in particular—inflated the number of Hitler's victims at will." In fact, he claims, the long-trumpeted number of six million Jewish victims has been radically pared back in Israel in order to sound more credible, to an official 1.5 million. Of course, Yassine reminds his readers, "our deeply held Islamic convictions" renders the death of a single innocent victim, "Jew or not," one too many.[\[22\]](#) Yet it is obviously important to Yassine—as it is to certain Holocaust deniers—to deflate the

numbers.

The Zionist usurpation of Palestine, aided and abetted by Hollywood's Jewish production funds and cinematic talents (e.g. the "mythical Schindler"), would be bad enough. But for Yassine, who thinks in civilizational terms, the Zionist plan, backed by the United States, is much greater: to build on the Palestine beachhead in order to occupy the lands and economy of 300 million Arabs. Since according to the "Jewish Bible," "gentiles' can and ought to be exterminated if they stand in the way of the plans of the chosen people," the likelihood of Israel one day unleashing its nuclear arsenal to realize its plan cannot be excluded.[\[23\]](#)

How does Israel's seeming power and unquenchable appetite square with Yassine's confidence in the ultimate triumph of Islam? Here he falls back on common Arab-Muslim themes. Time is on the Muslims' side. Israel is a temporary artifact, just like the medieval Crusader states. Israel's Jewish heterogeneity (e.g., the Ashkenazi/Sephardi cleavage) is deemed proof of the state's artificiality and vulnerability, "being constituted of a rabble of heterogeneous peoples." How this squares with the essentialist nature of the Jewish character, from the Qur'an to modern times, he does not say. But one cannot wait passively. Rather, Yassine exhorts Muslims to "understand history and prepare ourselves" for God's "conditioned promise." What are God's conditions? "Faith, social readiness, resistance, and martyrdom." Who are today's shining examples? Who demonstrates that "men of faith are not inevitably nonchalant fatalists"? They are the best elements of the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad and the Lebanese Hizbullah, those who embrace martyrdom.[\[24\]](#)

In Yassine's seamless world, the Zionist menace is ever-present and must be fought resolutely. His memorandum to Muhammad VI was directed nearly entirely inward toward the woes that the king's late father had wrought on Morocco. But he made sure to single out for blame Hassan's well-documented foreign friend: "cosmopolitan Zionist Jewry." Hassan's unsparing efforts to please the "chosen people," he said, led people to characterize his regime as a "Judaecracy." Disavowing such a grave offense would not be easy for the new king since his father's "accomplices" would surely resist.[\[25\]](#) (The reference was, among others, to Andrei Azoulay, a Moroccan Jew and the financial adviser of both Hassan and Muhammad).

When it comes to the Jews, it is impossible to classify Yassine as any sort of moderate, and his position is indistinguishable from that of the entire range of Islamists, from al-Qa'ida through the Muslim Brethren.

Planting a Seed?

Moroccan Islamism's main "threat," at present, is more in the societal arena than high politics. The monarch and his system enjoy the support of the European Union and the United States, and the regime wields preponderant power over the Islamist current (and civil society in general). Morocco's leading expert on its domestic Islamists, Muhammad Tozy, has been consistent in his belief that the Islamists do not pose a serious challenge to the regime, and that the JCG will split after Yassine passes from the scene.^[26]

The problem is that Morocco's underlying socio-economic difficulties provide fertile ground for the Islamist current. Hassan was committed to "homeopathic," controlled liberalization; Muhammad seems determined to accelerate the process; but both approaches are predicated on social and political stability and a condition of stasis at the highest political levels. Yassine's message, therefore, is guaranteed to find a receptive audience among those sectors of the public most frustrated by the lack of change. However improbable the likelihood of an Islamist takeover, Yassine's ideas, combining classical Islamic themes with an Islamic-style "liberation theology" to combat the evils of globalization, imperialism, and the perfidious Jews, will undoubtedly continue to resonate even after his passing.

Morocco has managed to evade a repetition of the Algerian scenario. But the gradual strengthening of Islamism in Morocco—a Muslim land separated from Europe only by narrow straits—bears close watching.

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^[1] See <http://www.al-jamaa.com> and <http://www.yassineonline.net>.

^[2] *Al-Islam au al-Tufan*, at <http://www.yassineonline.net/letters/arab-toufane.htm>.

^[3] Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Morocco," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*, XXIII (1999): 449-50.

^[4] Abdessalam Yassine, *Winning the Modern World for Islam*, trans. Martin Jenni (Iowa City: Justice and Spirituality Publishing, Inc., 2000), p. 149.

^[5] This is an accepted, deeply rooted tenet in Islam, drawing on Surah 3: 140 of the Qur'an, and elaborated on by numerous commentators. Thanks to my colleague Nasir Basal for his assistance on this point.

^[6] Yassine, *Winning the Modern World for Islam*, p. 10.

^[7] Oriana Fallaci, "An Interview with Khomeini," *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 7, 1979.

^[8] Yassine, *Winning the Modern World*, pp. 10-1, 148, 162.

^[9] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[10] Ibid., p. 7.

[11] Ibid., p. 65, quoting Surah 8: 55.

[12] Ibid., pp. xxvii, 9.

[13] Ibid., pp. 9, 13.

[14] Mohammed Tozy, *Monarchie et Islam politique au Maroc* (Paris: Presses des la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1999), pp. 191-2.

[15] Abdessalam Yassine, "Memorandum: To Him Who Is Concerned," at <http://www.yassineonline.net/letters/index1.html>.

[16] *Encyclopedia Islam*, new ed., s.v. 'Umar (II) b. 'Abd al 'Aziz.

[17] Yassine, "Memorandum: To Him Who Is Concerned."

[18] Yassine, *Winning the Modern World*, pp. 163, 165.

[19] Ibid, pp. 156-65.

[20] Ibid., p. 52.

[21] Ibid., pp. 53-8.

[22] Ibid, p. 50.

[23] Ibid, pp. 50-1.

[24] Ibid, pp. 47-53.

[25] Yassine, "Memorandum: To Him Who Is Concerned."

[26] Mohamed Tozy, "Les Pronostics de Mohamed Tozy: Les Islamistes ne peuvent pas gagner," *Arabies*, Feb. 2001, p. 23.