Milestones: Commentary on the Islamic World

Deadly Milestone

Tanzeen R. Doha and Iftekhar Jamil

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Preface

Two massacres in 2013 signaled the necessary incompatibility[1] between the secular state and Islam: one in broad daylight in Rabaa Square, Cairo (August 2013), and the other after sunset in Shapla Chattar, Dhaka (May 2013).[2] These events marked a contemporary de-grounding of political Islam.[3] While massacres of Islamist bodies in the killing fields of the secular state is the ultimate dramatization of this "incompatibility," the contradiction is also made visible in juridico-legal proceedings, constitutional amendments, security discourse, extra-judicial murders, kidnappings, enforced disappearances, framed crossfires, and other operations of the administrative apparatus. In fact, the reach of the secular is so deep that at times it appears to exceed the state itself. The state does not simply operationalize secularism as a political doctrine; secularism de-naturalizes the state and employs its bureaucracy, courts, citizenry, finance, and security instruments to disarticulate Islam. The link between secularism and the state becomes more fluid, and more coherent with each successive disarticulation of Islam.

"Deadly Milestone" was first published in *The Volta*. In the essay, Iftekhar Jamil and I attempted to interrogate the secular through acts of translation and remembrance. We followed Talal Asad's instruction to trace the secular through its shadows, instead of confronting it head on.[4] In many ways, this is harder to do, because the reach of the secular is further than the state and economy. To categorize the secular is to miss its influence. The secular is in bodily capacities and sensibilities; it reorganizes the hearts of a populace. It is in the "blood" of the nation. It is what gives life in the nation its vitality. It is constitutive. This is precisely why the confrontation between citizens within *national secularism* and those outside of it - the Islamists - appears a confrontation between species that are fundamentally different. Unlike Frantz Fanon's concept of opposing species[5] - in which colonizer and colonized operate within a dialectic that can be overcome through decolonial violence (synthesis) - these species do not confront each other in a war of political societies. Islamists are threats because they exist. National secularism, unlike national socialism does not have a "racial hygiene,"[6] but it has a cleansing structure: a purifying project in which citizens must routinely demonstrate

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[1] See Wael Hallaq's *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, And Modernity's Moral Predicament* (2013). While Hallaq focuses on the structural incompatibility between the modern state and Islam, my emphasis is on the production of incompatibility by secularism.

[2] Witnesses say that the killings started earlier in the day, but what the regime termed "operation flushout" – systematic targeted killings and evacuation – began around evening time.

[3] By political Islam I mean pragmatic engagements by Islamists in the political discourse of civil society.

[4] See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003).

[5] See Frantz Fanon, translated by Richard Philcox, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005).

[6] Joachim Scholtyseck, "Fascism - National Socialism - Arab "Fascism": Terminologies, Definitions, and Distinctions." *Die Welt Des Islams* 52 (2012), 242-289.

their fidelity to the nation by subordinating Islam to the grammar of a secular identity formation. In order to maintain its own metanarrative, secularism constantly re-founds and reproduces itself in a new historical plane[7]. The Shahbag movement in Bangladesh, organized by anti-theist bloggers and other left progressives earlier in 2013, was such a moment of re-founding of the national through secularity. If believers adhere to the Shari'a, resist (meta)physical subsumption in the secular, and position themselves within the paradigm of a moral universe that exceeds and oversees political discourse, they violate conditions imposed by secularity and become enemy combatants[8]. The May 5 response by Hefazat-e-Islam - which was undoubtedly the largest public gathering of masses in the history of Bangladesh - was seen as such a deliberate transgression, a religious embodiment of infidelity to the refounding of national secularism.

In his classic text *Milestones,* Sayyid Qutb describes how believers on the road of Islam will encounter signposts along its path of social renewal. These signposts help maintain the movement for Islamic revival (*tajdid*). In Qutb's work - even in his darkest hours - there is a theological idealism. So, the "milestones" to which Qutb refers are not only guiding markers, they are also culmination points: an achievement at a particular stage in history. This stagism and teleology in Qutb was an outcome of the entrapment of his own thought in modern idealism. For us, milestones are not signs of a better future necessarily. They are an indication of a larger catastrophe, a final event in which the memory of the event is more real than the event itself. It is the end of the world as such, an end without sorrow, without nostalgia, an end where submission is facticity.

Tanzeen R. Doha
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Introduction

> Those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah, and are then slain or die, On them will Allah bestow verily a goodly Provision: Truly Allah is He Who bestows the best provision.
>
> —Qur'an (Surah 22, Ayah 58)

In the preface of *Poetry of the Taliban*, Faisal Devji examines the "human element" beyond the strict religiosity of the Afghan Taliban. He seeks to interrupt popular representations of the

[7] This author participated in preparing a communique in May 27, 2013 where he used similar language to describe white-supremacy. https://davisantizionism.wordpress.com/2013/05/27/note-from-revolutionaries-of-color-ii-2/

[8] The definition of "enemy combatant" had a few shifts, but the War on Terror defined it in a specific way. See Congressional Bills 108th Congress, H.R. 1029, (8), https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-108hr1029ih/html/BILLS-108hr1029ih.htm. While the definition primarily concerns engagements of the US government (which technically changed under Obama), the influence of this definition is global. The secularist state in Bangladesh is influenced by this conceptualization of the "enemy combatant" in its own articulation of counter-terrorism.

Taliban by suggesting that the poems in the collection reflect a consciousness that moves beyond mere political instrumentality or rigid Islamic codes of conduct. In this essay, we examine Faisal Devji's representation of the Taliban's poetic aesthetics by juxtaposing it against a new literary poetic style within the Deoband tradition in Bangladesh. The literary works we use to interrogate and critique Devji's elaboration emerged as a response to a massacre of Islamists in Dhaka on May 5-6, 2013. We prefer to address Devji's taken for granted assumptions without giving a counter-narrative on the Taliban themselves. In other words, we choose not to use polemic against polemic, narrative against narrative, or interpretation against interpretation. We choose a completely different set of events, within a proximate political-geography, where Islamist clerics and students from the Deoband tradition — an Islamic pedagogical and discursive tradition of which the Taliban are a part — respond to secular domination with a potentially new kind of Islamic affect and aesthetics. More than the aesthetics itself, the questions that we grapple with are: Are we potentially witnessing the emergence of an Islamist aesthetics that positions itself in opposition to a localized dynamic of the "War on Terror"? Have we entered a period of a final crisis of nationalist aesthetic paradigms? And are we seeing Islam — not simply as a premodern tradition but as an anti-modern force from within a specific genealogy — immanently unfolding and entering a new plane of history through an antagonism with both the liberal-secularist public sphere and a cultural sphere of ultra nationalism?

Aestheticization of the Taliban

In order to explain the "Taliban's self-consciousness," Devji not only separates the aesthetic from the political, but he also linguistically contextualizes the Taliban's poetics and shared sensibility. Devji writes that these poems demonstrate a human side beyond the "ethnic and doctrinal limits" frequently associated with the Taliban in popular discourse, and that the ambiguity in their poetic sensibility arises from the diversity of linguistic and social histories from which the group emerges. Devji writes that the Pashto language used by the Taliban poets has a close relation with "literary traditions of languages like Persian and Urdu that link the Pashtuns to Iran on the one hand and India on the other." It is curious that Devji locates for the Taliban's aesthetic "a consciousness external to their movement." He writes that the aesthetic dimension of their lives is not influenced by their ideology and is a thorough expression of their "individual sense of freedom." Devji suggests that the material collected in this text are written by "individual members or sympathisers of the Taliban" and therefore, radically different from the propaganda of the Cultural Committee of the Islamic Emirate. In describing the ambiguous lyricism of the *ghazal* form, Devji explains the significance of thinking about the relation between the profane and the sacred beyond structures of repression, but rather, as establishing "freedom as an internal quality." He writes that the Taliban's poetic form allows them to escape their own ideology, because it allows them to see the moral order from the outside. Devji then mentions how the collection of poems are not focused on contemporary Islamist figures like Mullah Omar or Osama Bin Laden but rather, they focus on figures from the earlier history of Afghan struggle — particularly that against British colonialism. Devji suggests that Soviet and American imperialists, compared to British colonialists are looked by the Taliban poets as the "palest of their imitators." Devji emphasizes that the Taliban militants and sympathizers are not interested in the "purely religious element,"

and there is a lack of focus on the Sharia. Further, he claims that the Taliban are not only referencing erotic and non-religious mystical literature, but also literary works from the past that are nationalist and socialist.

Poetic Archives of the Massacre

Devji's concepts — the human element, consciousness external to the movement, ideology, and freedom as an internal quality — de-materialize the Taliban and the larger Deoband tradition through an uncritical assimilation of their poetry into the European discourse of humanism. Devji attempts a negative dismantling of all the elements that constitute the Taliban: aesthetics is separated from political ethics, the sacred is separated from the profane, ideology is separated from the material ideology and determinations of the 'War on Terror', and consciousness is conceptualized as idealism separate from the *shari'a* and its moral doctrinal structure. Devji aestheticizes freedom, turning it into an internal quality of the individual and de-politicizing the contemporary positionality of Islamists — particularly those who challenge the logic of an imperialist war.

While the Taliban has its specificity, such aestheticization of their poetry impacts the hermeneutic context of a larger network of Deobandi revivalism — active in South and Central Asia — a tradition focused on perfecting the *shari'a* through obedience to a *tariqah*[9] for the purposes of encountering the real (*haqiqa*). The very concept of *tazkiyah-al-nafs*[10] disallows the separation of the believer's task with his heart and socio-political life. In fact, interventions from the outside — whether by a foreign power or local secular regime — produce an inverted world of non-Islam (*jahiliyyah*) for the believer, making bodily obedience to divine will extremely difficult. This creates a condition for the possibility of struggle towards disalienation.

On May 5, 2013, according to madrassa sources, close to one million people took over a large segment of Dhaka — between the national mosque and the Business District- forming the largest public gathering in the history of Bangladesh. Nearly all of the Qawmi madrassas of the country organized under a single banner, forming *Hefazat-e-Islam*, a phrase that literally means "to safeguard Islam." The masses marched in opposition to a series of denigrating — at times even pornographic — depictions of the Prophet Muhammad published in the secularist blogosphere earlier that year. After evening prayer on the day of the march, State forces turned off the electricity for a large segment of the Business District and forcefully removed Islamic journalists, launching what they termed "Operation Flushout." This operation, which continued until the morning of May 6, involved the disappearances and mass killing of Islamic students and clerics. The administration repressed local media that sought to report on the event and took legal measures against human rights organizations and documentarians that attempted to publish fact-finding reports. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera, along

[9] Specific concept of genealogy; chain of ethical lineage; Islamic path or way dependent upon following a specific religious scholarly line.

[10] *Purification of the soul or heart* may not be the best translation for this term. But it is often translated in that way. If one were to be serious about *tazkiyyah*, they would think about the violence of translation, and how the etymological and genealogical histories of soul or heart have significant distance from the meanings in Quranic Arabic.

with several key international organizations, reported that hundreds of Islamic clerics and students were killed that night.

In the rest of this essay, we examine the consequences of the May 2013 massacre in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We collected written memories, reflections, poems, novellas, videos, other literary and non-literary artifacts in the aftermath of the massacre. These are some of the forms in which the massacre is memorialized within the Islamist counterpublic.[11] These materials are the remaining traces — like dried blood — of the actual sets of events. It is a living archive that not only allows an immanent embodied critique of a secular society, but provides a marginal possibility for a realist speculation in retrospect. The materials of the archive are a critique of secular time: we simultaneously return to the flesh of the first killings, and stay within the silence of the present moment.

The following excerpt is from a poem written by a Qawmi madrassa student who witnessed the massacre of May 5-6, 2013. The poet speculates on the materiality of forms of death, and its relation to a secular regime, in which the distribution of power is not only operationalized by the State apparatus, but permeates the social life in the ethically ruined city Dhaka.

> There is enjoyment in death.
> For instance, I am walking and longing for the seductive fragrance of my lover
> But, I suddenly stop, and piss on an anthill
> Or, I am dating my fifth girlfriend
> I tear off some flowers and give them to her as a promise
> Like that.

A superficial reading of what the author calls "enjoyment in death" may lead one to think about the agential or intentional structure of the secular persons whom the poet addresses in this passage. Rather, the poet in his ethical judgment of secularity seems concerned about a specific generality that secular regimes produce: a fetish for this world, the *duniya* and its specific temporality which is naturalized in a final manner. Within this generality there is an affective history: a history of feeling, sensing, touching, smelling, embodying. One feels the dirt, disaster, and ethical corruption in Dhaka, where a massacre is the logical outcome of the structured erasure of Islam as a mode of life. The dynamic in this passage is the presence of Islam as a draft, as a wind, in the form of ethical critique of secular embodiment. In other words, the presence of Islam is within the absence of Islam. The voice in this passage is not of an individual author. But rather, it is a collective muffled voice of the *mu'minun* — the witnesses of the massacre — who are trapped in modern secularity, but are inspired by a fanaticism for the absent author (of revelations). The poem should not be mistaken as a call for the opposite of death — a philosophy of life. Rather, it should be read as an attempt to make a categorial distinction between two forms of death: the deaths of those charmed by the fetish of Man, and therefore this life, versus the deaths of those who fear Allah- within a larger general history of death.

[11] Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind uses the concept of the counterpublic in describing an Islamic society that is outside of the logic of the State in Egypt.

The condition of the ants drowned in urine and the flower torn to pieces is a minute material representation of the comprehensive and detailed violence of the secular on every living being. Here, the poet's thinking on the problematic of the secular is neither about secularism as a political doctrine, nor about the secular as an episteme of a particular historical period. Rather, his dwelling is on the fundamental ontology of violence: the violence that constitutes life within the force of secular regimes, configured by the logic of the 'War on Terror,' but more broadly, by modernity itself.

Let us leave the post-massacre condition in Dhaka for a moment. If we compare this Islamist poet's pessimistic observations on unethical secular mannerisms towards smaller, negligible beings like ants, with remarks by a recently released Muslim prisoner on how he survived the indignity of torture through companionships with insects and animals, we observe contrasting positions, grounded in an antagonism between two different worlds. Soon after being released from 14 years in Guantanamo Bay military prison Shaker Aamer explains in a BBC interview how his ethical relationships with other beings like ants and cats helped him survive imprisonment. Aamer says,

> I end up making friends with all kind of creatures. One of them is the ants. Because they were beautiful, the way they were doing things and all that. I never knew that how much time I can spend with them. But I start watching them. I start learning the different ants, the different colours, the different way of doing things. And it was beautiful because I learned so much, and they became so friendly with me that I do believe that animals, insects, all kinds of things that they do realize us. They do know us. They know the difference between us. But we don't know the difference between them because they are ants, but they know me. They knew me as me because I used to feed them three times a day, put them the food certain times. And they don't bother me.[12]

Aamer's ethical steadfastness allowed him to maintain a sense of dignity under torture. His attention to small details of the ants' lives derived not only from a particular kind of Islamic piety, but from Islam's non-anthropomorphic concept of divinity, and a non-anthropocentric relational structure within which beings are in a dynamic with each other because of their specific orientation towards "abstract worship,"[13] an embodied worship of that which cannot be seen or felt through the finite senses.

Returning to the original poem by the Qawmi madrassa student in Dhaka, in the next section we see a critique of the disruption of quiet life through indulgence in worldly pleasures:

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[12] Shaker Aamer's comments are reproduced verbatim here. We wanted to keep his tone, his accent, his dialect, and his errors intact. There is no need to forcibly convert him into a pure Briton. Close to fourteen years of interrogation in Guantanamo failed to assimilate Aamer. We respect that. For interview links see these two links: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35049397, https://shadowproof.com/2015/12/15/shaker-aamer-befriended-ants-stray-cats-to-survive-guantanamo-torture/

[13] Hegel uses this notion in describing Islam in his lectures *Philosophy of History* (1837).

Who really likes the sovereignty of the tranquil?
We like to throw small stones into the pond to create ripples and disturb peace
We like to kick empty bottles when we walk down the street
We like to break the silence of empty alleys
In the dark night of poetry
We enter its form with words, like we enter whores
To prove how we are poets and good servants…
Our lover's tidy appearance, and lipliner
Her pride and expensive makeup at the parlour
We take her to the park, and feel like men when we ruin her
Like that.

The tranquil is not simply an environment or a mood. Rather, it is a condition, a state of ethical order with particular cosmological underpinnings, a field with rules and coordinates for the opening up of a world in which only the unseen is sovereign. This originary condition — which has revelatory grounding — has been disrupted by something much deeper than an environmental shift, a cultural paradigm, or even a political-economic structure. All of these historical shifts emerge from within an ontological crisis, which is responsible for this disruption that derives its meaning from particular kinds of material relations that simultaneously emerge from and give meaning to the concept of man as sovereign. The confidence with which the sovereign man — whom we are obligated to historicize as secular — elevates himself as the decision-maker to "throw small stones into the pond," "kick empty bottles," or to massacre those who are humble, is a confidence rooted in a rebellion against divine order.

The comparison between vitriolic words entering the secular architecture of poetry with the dishonorable penetration of women is a critique of the structural relation between misogyny and secularism. In the last two lines of the section, the Islamist speaks from the perspective of secularists, demonstrating not only an antagonism between two modes of life but also a fluidity of ethical possibilities. In this sense, this is not simply a categorical judgment, but a call for Islam at the very base of social relations.

There is a quiet assembly
I walk towards it, and throw a bomb
Some are injured, some are dead
What difference does it make - if they do not die?
Like the anthill and the flowers, they too must die
There is enjoyment in death
In our quiet life, we need the breaking of silence
We need terrorists, alongside Tagore songs
It's like that.

In the last section of the poem the Islamist evokes an image — common within technics of contemporary media, in which Islamists are materially inscribed as terrorists who attack the mundane peacefulness of everyday life — to deconstruct not only the truth-strategies used by

secularism in mobilizing a specific discourse, but the actual sensation of felt-death. In other words, the Islamist ponders the inevitability as well as the globality of death itself. The poet ends with a critique of the necessary binary between Islam as terror, and nationalism as bourgeois language signified by Tagore's humanism. This statement is dangerous because it runs the risk of being misinterpreted as a reading of the social world in which there is no difference in power between the secular and the Islamic. But the structure and form of the poem solves this crisis for us: the poem is primarily constructed in question form, and involves open speculation about the materiality of death, and its relation to a domineering secular regime within a specific grammar of the "War on Terror." It is not a simple reduction of the world through a "postmodern" or "postcolonial" critique of binaries. Rather, it is a poetic questioning of the material metaphysics of the grounding of secularity.

Final Remarks

Sayyid Qutb's influence on our essay should be easy to identify. Even though Qutb is known mostly for his analysis of modernity as *jahiliyyah* in the text *Milestones*, his earlier works on literature and poetry are relevant to this essay. Qutb's distance from the world of literary conventions is itself a critique of the secular, because he saw in literature the fetish of Man. Since our object of inquiry in this essay has been the possibility of poetry as an affective-ethical response to secular power, we focus on that dimension of Qutb's work in which he navigates a similar concern: the death of literature in relation to the emergence of an inverted social totality of non-Islam. Except in our analysis we move from the death of literature to the conditions and strategies of death itself.

We ask, how are deaths mobilized within secularity? And, how are these death-strategies in antagonism with conceptualizations of death in Islam that materialize differently? The formation of death as experience has to be understood in relation to the formation of a particular administration of the senses, where the sense-structure of our bodies is thematized within the rationality of freedom. To put it simply: the empiricism of sense-experience is rationalized and universalized as truth through the concept of man as sovereign, who has as his telos: freedom. When the accumulation of knowledge through the senses of this particular man is conceptualized as truth we globalize European thought as thought itself. Normalization of particular thought as universal thought produces a kind of philosophical crisis that troubles the very possibility of thought itself, producing a certain anxiety in the modern man that is different from earlier anxieties. Anxieties prior to the secularization of thought were still within the immanent unfolding of thought itself, and due to strict contingencies of thought, those anxieties were contextual and temporal. Modern philosophical anxiety is more fundamental and elemental: it is a break within thought itself, organized around concepts of sense, free will, freedom within the rubric of man as a radically sovereign subject. This particular sovereign man globalized through relations of colonialism — a process we can name secularization — produces an anxious, pathological, sexually aggressive secular man in non-Europe who is directly disobedient to divine will. It is this secular man — a man who looks in the mirror and wants to see the white man — who hates the Islamist, whom we investigate.

Poetry is not outside of this crisis of man. The crisis of thought — materialized through the secular — incarcerates poetry within a structuralism and hermeneutics of words, sentences, and meanings. This fetish of the structures of poetry alienates it from the comprehensiveness of life. To show the relation of poetry to life is not to show a peculiar obsession with life, but rather, to grasp the limits and finitude of this life, and the acceptance of death as both closure and opening. Islamic resistance in and to poetry has to be grasped through a reconceptualization of man himself — a concept of time, body, and *ruh*[14] that are entangled within a specific rhythm. Death for this man is not the finality of life, but rather, a realization of *haqiqah*. Because of this, he is not an optimist, and has no need nor intention to turn the *duniya* into a utopia.

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Tanzeen R. Doha is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of California, Davis. His ethnographic research focuses on the confrontation between national secularism and Islam in Bangladesh within the structure of the global War on Terror.

Iftekhar Jamil is trained in Islamic sciences, literature, philosophy, and jurisprudence. He writes and thinks in Bengali, Arabic, Urdu and Farsi. At present, Jamil is writing a short history of the failure of Bengali poetry and literature in representing Islam.

Acknowledgments

We dedicate this short essay to our brothers in Islam who were martyred during Operation Flushout on May 5-6, 2013 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Iftekhar Jamil contributed to this essay by providing his critique in Bengali, which was translated by Tanzeen R. Doha.

Rashida Doha translated another poem, written originally by a Qawmi madrassa student, which we could not use for this piece, but it still influenced our reading strategy.

[14] It is often used to mean 'spirit'. Sometimes it is used to mean 'breath.' And, sometimes it is used to mean 'sign.' The meaning of the word can also be related to a concept of 'mercy.'