

Wafa Sultan and Saree Makdisi

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21 October, 2007

Two interesting public talks on campus last week formed a stark contrast. They provided good examples of how and how not to approach important political issues.

On Wednesday night, Dr. Wafa Sultan, a Syrian-American psychologist, spoke on the plight of women in Muslim countries. She says she began to question her Muslim faith when her professor was gunned down by terrorists chanting “God is great”, and related heartbreaking experiences of oppression in Syria as a female doctor.

On Thursday night, Professor Saree Makdisi, Lebanese-American professor of English and Comparative Literature at UCLA, spoke on the situation in the Occupied Territories. Unlike Dr. Sultan’s presentation based on individual experience, Makdisi’s presentation was based on the large-scale situation. His talk was filled with facts, quotes, and maps — and was at least as heartbreaking. Makdisi condemned violence by both sides, and also human rights violations by other countries in the region. He repeatedly argued from international law, under which the acquisition of land by conquest is inadmissible — in particular, Israel’s acquisition of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights — and under which settlements established on such conquered land are illegal.

You would hope that Sultan’s experiences could strengthen support for reformers in Muslim countries, and should lead to calls for increased understanding across religious and cultural divides; and that Makdisi’s presentation could lead to a better understanding of the Palestinian situation, eventually to a just and peaceful resolution.

According to Sultan, however, this is impossible: no dialogue is possible; there is a “Muslim mindset” that is irreducibly hostile to human rights and liberal democracy. A dismal argument; one that will do little to improve the situation of Muslim people in the United States, including Muslim students on our own campus; nor one that is likely to decrease the chances of further conflict, for instance involving Iran; nor one that will strengthen the position of reformers in Muslim countries.

Makdisi’s argument was also dismal: a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict — often regarded as the international consensus — is no longer viable, since the Israeli and Palestinian populations have become so intermixed

by Israeli settlements, by occupation, and since the West Bank has been effectively reduced to a series of isolated cantons cut off by military checkpoints and Israeli-only bypass roads. One very rarely sees maps of the Occupied Territories in the mainstream media — criss-crossed as they are by bypass roads, dotted with settlements, and saturated with checkpoints. But a cursory examination of a map drives home the utter despair of the Palestinian situation. Pointing to this map, Makdisi did not need to say much more: “That is not a State”.

From there, however, they proceeded in different directions: one towards hope, and the other towards, well, barbarism. One took an approach appropriate to a civilized society, and the other, sadly not.

According to Sultan, the US should have invaded Saudi Arabia instead of Iraq. And the western world should control the education systems of Muslim countries — in order to liberate Muslim women. Much of the audience broke into laughter at her suggestion — and rightly so, because her approach is horrendous, calling for violence, destruction, and foreign domination. Perhaps such suggestions play well to other audiences, but at an academic institution like Stanford, she forfeited her claims to credibility. Of course she has a right to her opinions; but we have no obligation to take them seriously.

On the other hand, Prof. Makdisi argued that since the two-state solution is unviable, there should be a single secular state in Israel-Palestine in which all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of nationality, ethnicity or religion. A controversial, perhaps utopian, but at least hopeful proposal — one that should spark interest and debate. Perhaps the Palestinian situation is so bad, that the minimal solution involving a Palestinian State is unviable, and the only solution remaining is the highest principled one. His approach was a constructive approach; the right approach.

But the most disturbing aspect of all this lies in the background. Beyond Dr. Sultan’s own personal experiences, we have better things to do than pay her much attention. But we should be alarmed by any organisation which seriously promotes such intolerance.

Scarily, Dr. Sultan’s talk had been advertised as part of David Horowitz’s “Islamofascism Awareness Week”, an effort to bring such luminaries and experts on the Muslim world as Rick Santorum, Sean Hannity, and Ann Coulter to college campuses (see <http://tinyurl.com/2agkxy>, for instance). According to Horowitz, “The progressive left is the enabler and abettor of the terrorist jihad. It has forged an “unholy alliance” with the most retrograde and reactionary forces in the world today. The institutional base of the left is the university system, from whose classrooms it is conducting a behind-the-lines psychological warfare campaign against its own countrymen and the democratic, secular and tolerant society they have created.” Horowitz’s paranoia may amuse those of us in this “psychological warfare campaign” who are apparently “enablers and abettors of the terrorist jihad” — but may be a useful strategy to attack the academic freedom of people whose views he disagrees with. It seems even the organisers of Dr. Sultan’s talk — the Stanford Review, and Students for an Open Society — found this connection too unsavory. The event seems to have been removed from Horowitz’s website — and rightly so.

This extremist connection led off-campus groups to protest outside Dr. Sultan's talk. The "Raging Grannies", a prim and proper group of octogenarian rabble-rousers, held placards of "No hate speech" and "We stand with our Muslim Friends", and sang songs for tolerance. (See <http://tinyurl.com/2u5r2f> for details.) One can only wish that more students were there to protest.

After all, who can argue with a granny?