



By Dalil Badar



There was a time Ahmed was regarded as a refined gentleman in his community. Suave, modern, worldly-wise, street-smart, business-savvy, always dapperly dressed and cheerful. He alternated easily between business suits and ties and the long flowing robes and turbans he donned for worship and religious occasions. He was just at home in a five-star restaurant or a European airport as he was giving the call to prayer at his local masjid or volunteering at the madrasah on weekends. He spoke English and French as fluently as Arabic and Urdu. His children attended the best secular schools as well daily madrasah classes. Both his wives were young and educated professionals. Yet they never stepped out of the Sharia limits.

That was prior to 1200 GMT September 11, 2001. Then, his jet-black beard made him look handsome to non-Muslims, and sexy to the ladies. Now he has to exercise extreme caution in daily life, even though he has no sympathy for the terrorists who have usurped his religion for their nefarious aims.

“Caught between a rock and a hard place” is how he describes his situation. The terror networks look down on true God-fearing Muslims as cowardly sell-outs, and would not hesitate to pull the trigger on them. At the same time, the Western agencies and militaries out to “combat” the terrorists would certainly consider him a suspect based on psychological and social profiling to identify potential terror operatives.

Ahmed is in his forties and has two wives - a common practice in his country - and seven kids. He wears his beard long and favours the loose baggy clothes traditionally worn in his community. The

terrorists also follow the same dress code, but the CIA and fellow spooks do not understand that the dress style is not a monopoly of the terrorists.

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Ahmed's fortunes have tumbled since 9/11. He is in a no-man's land, hunted by both sides in the war on terror. The bad guys do not like him and the good guys do not trust him.

It was a cold grey morning in the holy month of Ramadan several years ago. As the family of Ahmed's elder brother Said sat down to their pre-dawn meal, commandos smashed through the front door and violently ransacked the whole house before dragging off Said and Said's eldest son Suleiman for enhanced interrogation.

The next hundred days were a living hell for the whole clan. Fearing victimisation, no one was willing to enquire from the authorities the whereabouts of their men. No one even informed the human rights observers who document such disappearances and pressure the police and military to release innocent captives.

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Ahmed's business has suffered terribly as former clients exercise caution, keeping him at arm's length. Once dominated by dealings with the "infidel" West, it has had to bear the brunt of the "silent boycott" of devout Muslims portrayed by the media as radicals.

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He has witnessed how intelligence operatives have visited ruin on his community. Several of his neighbours have been raided by agents and beaten up, their properties confiscated under the new terror laws. A favourite tactic of rogue state agents is to identify a wealthy target and start harassing him for protection money. If a target balks, violence is meted on his household to impoverish him. Another common tactic is the drive-by shooting of "suspects", mostly innocent of any wrongdoing but considered acceptable collateral damage by trigger-happy cops and the state. Often carried out by state agents in disguise, it is difficult to accuse individual cops for specific murders. But even where state agents are openly guilty of torture and extrajudicial executions, not a

single one has been reprimanded to date, let alone charged with murder. Ahmed recalls many cases of “suspects” who died in custody, some of whose remains were never returned to their families.

Ahmed’s friends were targeted by the terror cells and by the local police as well as the CIA. A few were executed by the terrorists while others were dismissed as collateral damage when drone strikes went wrong, as they often did. Neither the extremists nor the state organs ever apologised for killing innocent civilians.

In the first few years after 9/11, Ahmed was under immense pressure to change his devoutly religious persona. He was torn between his beliefs and fear for his safety. Any capitulation was anathema. It would signal his loss of faith in the religion of his forefathers.

He trimmed his beard to a quarter of an inch, stopped wearing Arabic and Oriental traditional dress and tried his best to look like a Westernised Muslim. He changed his ringtone from a devotional hymn to a film song. He stopped volunteering at the local masjid and madrasah. His children stopped attending the madrasah.

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The turnaround took a painful toll on Ahmed’s sanity. He felt he had betrayed his ancestral religion by turning secular, and would be forever damned to hell. After another heart-wrenching episode of reflection, he threw caution to the wind and defiantly reverted to his old persona of devotion. But the damage was done. He was now damaged goods. The community warily avoided him. And the daily degradation meted by the authorities continued, as did the sneers of the terrorists.

Ahmed has gained absolutely nothing by capitulating. On the contrary, he has lost a great deal. As he reflects on the beast called the War on Terror, he sadly shakes his head as he recalls the toll it has taken on his middle class existence. And how things will never be the same again.

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