

Gad and Arshad: A tale of two men from two different worlds

By Mounir Bishay, Los Angeles

Gad and Arshad are two young men in their twentieth. What brings them together is their hate for ISIL, and the desire of doing something to tell others about it. However there are many things that set the two men apart. They differ, in their ethnic and religious backgrounds, in the place where they live, in the way their respective communities accept them, and in the tragic circumstances that await one, compared to the honor that surrounds the other.

Each of the two men has a remarkable story to tell. Let's ponder some of the highlights.

Gad is a Coptic Egyptian Christian from the village of Nasereyya, Governorate of Menia in Upper Egypt. He is a new graduate at just 22 years old and works as an English teacher in Junior high schools.

Gad found himself, overnight, subject to investigation and imprisonment by the authorities in Egypt for taking 20 seconds video tape of 4 students mostly 15 years old. The students were playfully making fun of ISIL who pose as religious people but in reality they kill, slay, and burn their victims alive.

The tape was later considered an insult to Islam and mocking the way Muslims pray. But it is clear from the consequences of events that the purpose of the tape was mocking ISIL and exposing their hypocrisy. Those who were accused of making the tape did not mean to distribute it. The tape was distributed by the Muslims of the village after they found it by chance.

Soon after the tape was distributed, Muslims of the village went on a rampage destroying and burning the homes of the

Christians while occupants were still inside. Security forces failed to respond to calls by the Christian asking for help.

The Coptic Christians in that village are living now in fear. Students don't feel safe going to school. The board of education ordered Christian students to stay home for fear of being harmed. This is a very critical time for students to miss school. The school year is approaching the end and final exams is about to start.

As it always happens, even before the court issued its ruling, the mob has already made their demands that the 5 Christian families leave the village as a condition of returning to calm.

On April 17, 2015, a council meeting made of prominent people in the village along with representatives of government officials, took place to bring reconciliation. The council made a decision that the teacher leave the village after the court announces its verdict, and regardless of what is the verdict.

Still, the final future of Gad is unknown. The video that lasted only about 20 seconds which was meant to be criticism of ISIL became evidence against him of insulting Islam. The punishment in such cases depends on the judge who can get out of legal penal code, using instead Sharia law which differs drastically according to the school of jurisprudence. Thus the punishment could be double or triple or can even reach capital punishment. However, even before the judge pronounces the ruling, a punishment is already in place for Gad which is departure for ever from the place where he was born and raised.

In contrast, Arshad is a Muslim young man of a Pakistani heritage. Arshad (29) was born in London, England and lives there. He works as an aspiring comedian. Unlike Gad, Arshad receives a great honor from the British authorities. The

English Police employs Arshad on their staff to visit schools in London, and expose ISIL and appeal to students to abandon religious extremism.

What Arshad does is talk about the issues that are dividing the British community in dealing with the Muslim community.

His tool is poking fun of the issues. In one of his meeting in a school, Arshad asked the audience that those of Muslim background lift up their hands. About one third raised their hands. Then Arshad said, "Wow, with this we can take over the country, Sharia law is in the way!" but then, he quickly said that he was only kidding. Arshad purpose was to make fun of what people believe that Muslims plan to take over the country and impose Sharia Islamic law on everybody. On another occasion a young woman asked if she can give him a hug. After the hug, Arshad screamed "you stole my wallet!" still that was Arshad's way to dispel the belief that Muslims are less honest than others. But, Arshad's criticism was never looked on as insulting to anyone but as a tool to fight insults.

No doubt that Arshad does a great service for his community by correcting many misconceptions thru laughter. But the greatest service Arshad does is to his country, England, by trying to stop young British males and females from leaving England to join ISIL. It is estimated that about 600 have left England to Turkey and from there to territories controlled by ISIL.

An important factor for the success of Arshad to reach the hearts and minds of his audience is that his message is personal, sincere and clear. He often talks about issues in his own life and in the lives of many who listen to him. He uses humor, rather than violent protests to express his feelings

The story of Arshad started after the police authorities have seen YouTube tapes made by Arshad of community situations he dealt with, using his funny style, and ending it with positive

constructive message. They thought to add him to their staff to spread that message of reconciliation between the Muslim community and the British society.

A thought came to my mind: what would happen if we switch places of operation between Gad and Arshad? How about if Gad, the Coptic Christian, lives and works in London, and, if Arshad, the Pakistani Muslim man, lives and works in Upper Egypt? Would both experience the same problems/ rewards as they do today? My answer is in the negative. It is the community with its values and ideals that makes all the difference.

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