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Of Foxes and Lions

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He probably does not know this (or perhaps he does), but Boris Johnson is held in many Muslim quarters around the world in very high regard. Every video featuring him that I have seen pop up on a Facebook page run by a virtual Muslim community focuses on one very specific thing about him: How he is completely free of the trappings of majesty. ‘Compare this to our own so-called “leaders”’ is the main refrain, often supplemented by a verse from the Qur’an or a line from the Prophet’s Sayings—typed up in Arabic no less—extolling the virtues of Humility, Modesty and Justice.¹

Walking Tall

And so, here is Boris, when he was Mayor of London, riding his bike. He is dressed shabbily. No bodyguards. No one pays him much attention. He is not looking behind his back. Instead, looking down, he is clumsily locking his bike. Next is Boris awkwardly ambling about the isles of a convenience store—and not just any convenience store, but one run by Muslims! Next we see him standing in a queue to pay for the handful of things he just picked up, on his own, with his own hands, that he wishes to purchase and to pay for, with his own money, that he takes out of his own pocket, with his own hands. When it’s Boris’s turn, the clerk at the other side of the counter, a man who is not bowing or trembling, gives him a respectful smile, a nod of recognition, followed by a jovial “Hello!” And then, casually stuffing Boris’s stuff in a plastic bag, he starts to banter with Boris—“Don’t tell me you are on your bike today,” to which Boris answers with a slurry, “I am,” to which the clerk responds with by complaining about the traffic, to which Boris, now speaking as the Mayor, replies with: “it’s going to be much better, don’t your worry.”

To the eyes of his many admiring Muslims, Boris Johnson is the closest thing that we have today to Omar redux.² Omar—‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb—the second of the original Four Rightly Guided Successors,³ the man who intimately lives in the memory of every Sunni Muslim (with the Sh’ia, let’s just say, it’s complicated), practicing, deist, atheist, or fundamentalist, as a ruler who ruled so justly and so fairly that he was famous, as lore would have it, for indulging in long naps under trees, openly and without protection. Such was his impartiality that his nickname is “Al-Farooq”—the one separates—the one who is able to clearly distinguish between what is just and what is unjust.⁴ Why is the West so much ahead of us Muslims? Why has God rewarded them, the infidels, with so much plenty, so much power, so much prosperity, so much Peace? The answer is obvious: because they, the West, the infidels, are guided by leaders who embody the key tenets that a just ruler must possess: Justice. Or at least such is the strong sentiment expressed by those who watch in utter awe the video of the shambling Boris. For, Himself Just and Impartial and Fair, God is not prejudiced: Yes, even the utterly godless Chinese, God will reward (at least here on earth)

¹ Boris Johnson at MILAD Supermarket.

² “Umar.”

³ Rashidun (Caliphs).

⁴ “The Justice of ‘Umar (radhiAllahu ‘anhu).”

with all of the plenty that they deserve. Let them serve as an example.⁵ For, did not the Prophet himself say: “One who lends effort to the widows and the poor is like ... one who regularly prays at night and fasts during the day.”⁶

Of the original Unholy Three Impostors —Putin, Trump, and Johnson—only Johnson remains standing today. And standing tall. Trump, while still fighting, is facing arrest, several trials, criminal and civil, and, at least theoretically, certain prison time. Unless, of course, the Republicans take Congress back in 2022 or he returns to the White House in 2024. The first prospect is almost certain while the second is not unlikely. But either way, Trump has already turned into a shadow of his former self and no matter what happens, his “Glory Days” are surely behind him. As for Putin, he too is still fighting, but his prospects are even dimmer.

So what happened? Why is Johnson still walking tall while the other two are staring at the abyss?

Johnson the Fox

The answer to this one is also obvious: Boris Johnson understands exactly who he is and has remained laser focused on one thing—winning—while the other two, although they did certainly have a strong run at it, have forgotten who they are and how they have managed to go so far, and have taken their eyes off the ball. Or, putting it in Lafontainian terms and adopting Steve Fuller’s favorite animals:⁷ while Johnson the fox has been not only perfectly happy remaining a fox, but delights in being a fox, both Trump and Putin, also proven foxes with impressive track records of ransacking tidy coop houses, made the fatal mistake of deciding that they had had enough of being foxes and that they had succeeded enough to move “up the ladder” and become full-fledged lions.

Trump attempted to frontally usurp the electoral process and remain in power by clumsily grabbing the tools of the very swampy system he was supposed to drain and ham-handely went about pressing the wrong buttons and tugging at the wrong pulleys—calling state officials on the record to find him some votes so the he can close the gap,⁸ blackmailing world leaders while the bureaucracy listened in, aghast.⁹ In other words, he roared and foxes don’t have the voice to roar. The other fox, Putin, who was methodically dismantling NATO in a manner that would have made Sun Tzu more than proud—quietly, efficiently, without firing a bullet, but by dividing houses and setting clan against clan—and speeding up the implosion of old, well entrenched democracies, again, quietly and efficiently—this fox too

⁵ Bouzid, Ahmed. 1996. “Science and Technology in the Discourse of Sayyid Qutb.” *Social Epistemology*: 10 (3-4): 289-304.

⁶ *Sahib al-Bukhari*, Volume 7, Book 64, Number 265.

⁷ O’Leary, Denyse. 2018. “Sociologist Steve Fuller: How ID Foxes Can Beat the Darwinian Lions.” *Evolution News & Science Today*. July 11. <https://evolutionnews.org/2018/07/sociologist-how-id-foxes-can-beat-the-darwinian-lions/>.

⁸ Amy, Jeff 2020. “Georgia Elections Chief Battles Fellow Republicans, Trump.” *AP News*. November 17. <https://apnews.com/article/raffensperger-battles-fellow-gop-trump-a36b023d910814fa8c20d5e62d8ad645>.

⁹ Nathans, Benjamin. 2022. “Bureaucrat’s Honor.” *The New York Review of Books*. April 21.

felt that he had had enough with being a quiet fox and decided that it was time that he was “taken seriously,” that he was afforded the “respect” that he and his nation deserved, the he be called “A Lion!” and that he be allowed to walk among other lions as a lion. As Fiona Hill, of Impeachment-Part-One fame, put it in a 2015 Brookings Institute piece: “Putin wants respect for Russia, not external obligations. He wants respect in the old-fashioned, hard-power sense of the word.”¹⁰ And so, he invaded Ukraine, unilaterally, frontally, shamelessly, illegally, the way the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, unilaterally, frontally, shamelessly, illegally. But lions know how to commit unilateral, frontal, shameless crimes. They have the power to do it—“a whole toolkit,” as policy mongers like to put it—and a long track record of practice, and so they know what they are doing. Foxes don’t.

The Ways of the Fox

A recently published propaganda video posted by the twitter account of “Defense of Ukraine,”¹¹ a “Ukraine government organization” (as per its own Twitter self-description) showing Boris Johnson walking about the streets of Kiev with Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, captures well the Fox vs. Lion game that Boris Johnson continues to play very well. On his part, Zelenskyy, a cub in training, but a cub who, given his thespian origins, also understands the ways of the fox much better than the aging lions of Western Europe, is fighting for his nation’s survival. Or, at least this is what we are told by him, ceaselessly, and, like a good Product Marketer, using the same language every single time he says it: “This is not just Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This is the beginning of a war against Europe, against European structures, against democracy, against basic human rights, against a global order of law, rules and peaceful coexistence.”¹² But more than that, like the good, hard working Digital Marketer that he has turned out to be, he always ends his pitch with the same, crisp, clear CTA (call to action): “We thank [INSERT COUNTRY NAME HERE] for the help you have provided, but in order to survive from the war with Russia we need more help.”¹³

The tweet of the video in question reads: “At a handshake distance. @BorisJohnson and @ZelenskyyUa walked through the center of Kyiv and talked to ordinary Kyivans. This is what democracy looks like. This is what courage looks like. This is what true friendship between peoples and between nations looks like.”

And indeed, the video shows the two leaders side by side, at “a handshake distance,” walking the deserted (but very clean) streets of Kiev, surrounded by a handful of armed soldiers,

¹⁰ Hill, Fiona 2015. “This is What Putin Really Wants.” *Brookings*. February 24. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/this-is-what-putin-really-wants/>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1512867082932793347>.

¹² Collinson, Stephen. 2022. “How Zelensky Changed the West’s Response to Russia.” *CNN*. February 28. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/28/politics/zelensky-us-response-to-russia/index.html>.

¹³ Yoon, Dasl. 2022. “Zelensky Requests Weapons from South Korea” *The Wall Street Journal*. April 11. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-04-11/card/zelensky-requests-weapons-from-south-korea-n80kSErcIdnbbZNC6eg9>.

waving at “ordinary Kyivans,” with Boris approaching one such ordinary Kyivan, a young man in jeans and white sneakers, calling out “Boris” and “Great Britain,” waving in the manner of a Millennial. And then, miracle: Boris does his usual thing and shakes hands with the seemingly awe stricken young man.

Does the video tell us anything that is not a simple lie? Are we really supposed to believe that this young man that Boris and Volodymyr bumped into was not cast, given his lines, and cued on demand to perform? Are we supposed to believe that he was simply there, that he was randomly encountered, backpack and all? How about the buildings surrounding the two men? Are we supposed to believe that they were occupied by anyone? Are we really supposed to believe that we are witnessing courage enacted in this video and that the remotest chance existed that anything untoward would happen during the filming of the staged sequence?

The Power of Performance

Both Johnson and Zelenskyy know that none of that matters. What matters more than the performance, is *the fact and the act of the performance*. Sure, the performance itself will be embraced at face value by those who will want to embrace it: they too will say, with a straight face, that this is an illustration of solidarity and courage. But few will fail to see through the charade. No, the more important action is the very act itself: the act of putting together and publishing a video that adheres to the simple rules of black and white propaganda. Because, foxes have learned, one can claim, and do so on very solid ground, that there is much more truth in simple, open, naked, prevarication, the type that dares to snipe and to mock its challengers, than in the lumbering, heavy, and ponderous “truths” of powerful lions. In other words, the ham-handedness is the point of it.

But what makes the video interesting is this: While Jonson was playing his usual game, and doing it very well, Zelenskyy was dabbling in a new game. Zelenskyy was playing Lion without really pretending to be a real lion, let alone thinking that he is a real lion, while gingerly trotting like the nimble fox that he clearly is. ‘I know the rules of your game, lions, and I bow in my respect for them. And to show you just how much I respect them, let me go above and beyond the call of duty and borrow the very words of your most cherished *Leo omnium Leonum* (Churchill) and toss your way the red meat that you love to clamp your jaws upon.’ At least for the time being, Zelenskyy has a big ball that he is working hard to keep his eyes glued to—repelling the invaders—an opponent paralyzed in his griffonic throes, and several aging lions who don’t fully understand, or want to bother to understand, what is going on or what Zelenskyy is up to, but who instinctively sense that perhaps he has the key to some way out of their inability to deal with the many foxes that have wrought havoc to their prides. Whether Zelenskyy will be able to sustain his balancing act or whether he will lapse one way or the other remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the caravan ambles on.